THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE PC GAMES MAGAZINE

PC GAMER

CRYSIS 2
The exclusive PC screens the consoles don't want you to see!

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS EXPANSION
NOW WITH **ELECTRIC DRAGONS!**

12-MONTH MMO SUPERTEST
Ultimate MMO review roundup!

COVER TITLES ARE CLICKABLE!

WORLD EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

FALLOUT NEW VEGAS
Armageddon never looked so good

RICKETS
THE GAMER PLAGUE
Do you have it? p. 18

REVIEWED
SUPREME COMMANDER 2 | STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT
PLUS: Star Trek Online—Our complete tour of Starfleet!

$8.99US
04
NUMBER 199
APR 2010
Future MEDIA WITH PASSION
0 70989 38754 6

PC GAMER

APRIL 2010

CLICKING A TITLE TAKES YOU DIRECTLY TO THE ARTICLE

EYEWITNESS

BEST MULTIPLAYER SERVERS 5
RICKETS HEALTH ALERT! 7
THE SPY 7
DEV MAN TALKING: BLAIR FRASER 8
GAME CLUB: FREE CLASSICS 9
MODS: MASH-UPS 10
TRENDS: THE FIRST LEVEL'S FREE 10
RELEASE METER 10

PREVIEWS

CRYSIS 2 11
STAR TREK ONLINE 13
DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS – AWAKENING 15
SILENT HUNTER 5 16
ARMA 2: OPERATION ARROWHEAD 17
BRINK 19
NAUMACHIA 20

FEATURES

FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS 21
MMO SUPER TEST 26

REVIEWS

SUPREME COMMANDER 2 30
STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT 32
WINGS OF PREY 33
NAPOLEON: TOTAL WAR 34
DIVINITY II: EGO DRACONIS 35
GRAPPLING HOOK 35
BORDERLANDS: MAD MOXXI'S UNDERDOME RIOT 35
BORDERLANDS: THE ZOMBIE ISLAND OF DR. NED 35

HARD STUFF

REVIEWS: ATI HD 5970 AND HD 5670 37
REVIEWS: SAITEK AND STEELSERIES HEADSETS 37
REVIEW: RAZOR IMPERATOR MOUSE 38
HARD STUFF TRINITY 38

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTE 3
LETTERS 4
EXTENDED PLAY: BUILD A TORCHLIGHT DUNGEON 36
BACKSPACE 39

PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

It Pays to Play

A very big-name developer came by to show us a very big sequel to its very big and highly regarded previous game. As we huddled over the demo, one of the developers blurted out a shocking, unholy statistic: Fewer than half of the gamers who purchased the original game ever finished it. This is not an unusual figure: I know of another top-shelf game whose completion rate fell under *four percent*.

PC games are a bargain, and I don't mind paying $50 for a game I enjoy, much less one that I absolutely love down to its dirty naked code. But paying $50 for a game that you only play for three or four hours before it becomes so repetitious that you alt-tab out to the desktop and poke around Steam to find out what's on sale—well, that feels like a rip-off.

Big editor is watching.

I wonder if this isn't why so many gamers maintain a cavalier attitude toward piracy—because we wait so long with so much anticipation for so many games, but all too often, we quickly lose interest when we actually begin playing them. And if retailers won't take a game back because it won't work at all, they sure won't take it back because we got bored before we even left drydock. So, maybe people who'd never dream of walking away with cheap 3D glasses from the movie theater might be inclined to get the hang of BitTorrent under the assumption that—whether true or not—they'll purchase the game if they like it enough to keep playing it through to the end.

There are lots—*lots*—of games I've never finished, and *Mass Effect* was one of them until I finally churned through it in a marathon session over Christmas. Let's put it this way: Four days, but only *one* pair of underwear—that's how riveted I was. And yet, it took me several hours to get into it, and I initially disliked it. If I hadn't given the game a second chance, I would've ended up feeling not ripped off, but instead deeply disappointed—as if I'd gone out on a date, paid for dinner, and then hated the sex. Worse, I'd have missed out on *Mass Effect*.

I could be wrong, but the dev didn't seem all that worried about the awful statistic he reported—his very big game had done very big business, after all. But his own research seemed to indicate that there was a *serious* problem with the way the game was designed. Maybe it needed to be shorter. Maybe it needed more diverse gameplay or a stronger story. But it needed *something*; developers ignore signs of dissatisfaction at their own peril.

Of course, you can still rely on *PC Gamer* to let you know which games lose their luster after a few hours (and which ones don't even offer that much). But I also know from personal experience that we, as gamers, sometimes need to give games time to work their magic. And to keep in mind that PC games still offer among the biggest payoffs for every dollar you spend, right up there with all-you-can-eat buffets and *Scrabble*.

LOGAN DECKER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

THE PLAYLIST 0410

LOGAN DECKER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It was awesome to import my Shepard character into *Mass Effect 2* only days after I finished the original. I just wish I could bring her into other games, too...it'd be fun to watch her take out *Enviro-Bear*.

EVAN LAHTI SENIOR EDITOR

So far, *Star Trek Online* is in the lead for 2010's "Best Abomination Made in a Character Creator" award (the inaugural winner: *Spore*). See the results of our Prime Directive–violating genetic misdeeds in Backspace.

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR

Why do so many RTS games tether the camera so low to the ground? Zooming the camera all the way out in *Supreme Commander 2* to watch my plans unfold is brilliant. Be free, little camera!

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER

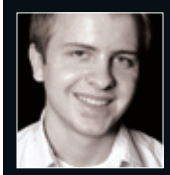
I've been grazing on browser games of varying quality all month. You know, someone ought to do a feature story on the very best games you can play all day at work. Not that I would. Just sayin'.

JOSH AUGUSTINE CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

I wanted to play through *Dragon Age: Origins* three times before moving on to *Mass Effect 2*, but I can resist its siren's call of robots and sniper rifles no longer! Let the swooning of alien babes commence.

ERIK BELSAAS HONEY-SMOKED INTERN

PRENTICE GEDE INTERN OVER EASY



Instead of playing games this month, I donned a trenchcoat and sunglasses and traversed the globe solving clandestine conspiracies. Oh J.C. Denton, how I've missed you.

PC Gamer (ISSN 1080-4471) is published 13 times a year, monthly plus a Holiday issue following the December issue, by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Periodicals Postage Paid at South San Francisco, CA and at additional mailing offices. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Subscriptions: One year basic rate (12 issues & 12 CDs: U.S.:$29.95. Canada: $49.95. Foreign: $69.95. Canadian price includes postage and GST (GST #128220688). For customer service, write PC Gamer Customer Service, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Phone: (800) 898-7159. Online: www.pcgamer.com/customerservice. Subscriptions do not include newsstand-only specials. Postmasters please send change of address to PC Gamer, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Corporate, advertising sales, circulation, editorial and production offices: Future US, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Phone: (650) 872-1642. Fax (650) 872-2207. Website: www.futureus.com. Editorial information should be addressed to: Editor, PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Overnight delivery parcels should be addressed to: PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Future US publishes Guitar World, MacLife, Maximum PC, Nintendo Power, PlayStation: The Official Magazine, Pregnancy, Revolver, Windows: The Official Magazine and The Official Xbox Magazine. Entire contents copyright 2010 Future US. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Reproduction on the Internet of the articles and pictures in this magazine is illegal without the prior written consent of PC Gamer. Products named in the pages of PC gamer are trademarks of their respective companies. Future US is not affiliated with the companies or products covered in PC Gamer. IPM# 0781118. Produced in the U.S.A. Ride-along Enclosures in the following edition(s): B1, D1, D2, D3, D4. Standard enclosures: C1, C2, C3, C4. Publications Mail Agreement #40043631. Returns: 4960-2 Walker Road, Windsor ON N9A 6J3.

LETTERS

WE MUST GET A LOT OF MAIL

Every time you email Letters@PCGamer.com with your thoughts, insights and questions about PC gaming, an Xbox 360 is struck down by the Red Rings of Death.

WIN!

Supreme Commander 2

Don't settle for being a merely adequate commander, or even a pretty good commander. Settle only for the very best: Enter our contest to win one of 10 copies of *Supreme Commander 2* (reviewed on page 74), which, according to the Taco Bell menu, is like a regular commander, but it comes with extra beef, extra cheese-like substance and added sour cream. Email Contests@pcgamer.com with "The Supreme Commandment" in the subject line and your full name and mailing address in the body. See full contest rules on page 95.

I want to believe

You guys were right: *X-COM: UFO Defense* is a great game! I bought it after reading about it in *PC Gamer*, and I love it, but the graphics are so old-looking. I'd be happy to pay for an updated version of one of the best games ever made. Do you think there's any chance of an update sometime soon?

KURT STICHLER

We'd happily offer up our first-born children for that update, Kurt! There is hope for a revival: unconfirmed X-COM*-flavored rumors currently swirl around some major developers, so a new invasion of turn-based aliens could come at any time. A word of caution, however: we've had our hearts broken by promises of new* X-COM *games or spiritual successors before, only to have them canceled before completion.*

Where you least expect

Before you revoke my Man Card for watching *Alvin and the Chipmunks 2: The Squeakquel* by choice, I was pleasantly shocked when a certain magazine appeared in the hands (and scattered across the bedroom of) the Chipmunks' "guardian" and gamer Toby, played by Zachary Levi. Levi also plays the title character in NBC's *Chuck*, where *PC Gamer* has also made an appearance. Perhaps Mr. Levi is a fan? **ED SCHMALZ**

Zachary Levi has excellent taste in magazines (if not movies), as seen in this 2007 episode of *Chuck*.

It's entirely possible—we have agents everywhere. Hey Zachary, if you're reading this, tell Yvonne Strahovski (who gamers might know as Miranda from Mass Effect 2*) we said, "Hi." And Ed, to show our gratitude for watching "The Squeakquel" (so that we didn't have to) and reporting this sighting, we'll let you keep your Man Card—just this once.*

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Thank you, *PC Gamer*, and especially Tom Francis, for giving such a thoughtful, hype-less, intelligent and generally all-around fair review of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. I have *many* friends who hailed this game as the greatest, most elegant, engaging ,and amazing FPS ever created. I read other reviews that praised its innovative gameplay and its edgy content. So I played it, and my first and last thoughts were, "Meh." It certainly wasn't a terrible game, but the most mind-blowing multiplayer in existence? Really? Have these people ever played a good FPS (*Half Life 1 & 2, Dues Ex, Team Fortress 2, Counter-Strike, BioShock*, etc.)? I hope more people see through the smoke and mirrors and realize, oh yeah, there are *sooooo* many better games out there.

GRANT GEHR

PC GAMER AFTER HOURS

MESSAGE BOARDS

PC Gamer Podcast Forum pcgamerpodcast.com

GamesRadar PC Gaming Forum snipurl.com/h6oor

FACEBOOK facebook.com/pcgamermagazine

TWITTER

Logan: ARockLegend | Dan: DanStapleton | Evan: ELahti | Josh: JAugustine | Erik: Belsaas | Prentice: PrenticeGede

MULTIPLAYER

PC Gamer Steam Group **http://steamcommunity.com/groups/pcg**

PC Gamer/Maximum PC Team Fortress 2 Server IP **66.151.138.34:27015**

"It's startling to see how nasty people can be." —DOMINO

Modern race warfare

I wondered if I was the only one who noticed all the racial slurs flying around in *Modern Warfare 2* multiplayer, but your review put any doubts to rest. I had no idea stupidly racist people existed in such large numbers that I can't play a single match without being called something obscene by someone. I know this isn't Infinity Ward's fault (though their matchmaking system is so frustrating that *I* want to yell obscenities at them), but it's still startling to see how nasty people can be. **DOMINO**

Unfortunately, the phenomenon of Internet anonymity turning mild-mannered gamers into hate-spewing lunatics isn't limited to MW2. *However, one of the most dire consequences of Infinity Ward's move away from dedicated servers is the loss of the ability to kick obnoxious players out of your game. The only solutions are to play only with friends, or find another game that allows you to control what kind of gamer you associate with. We recommend the* PC Gamer/Maximum PC Team Fortress 2 *server (see the PC Gamer After Hours box to the left for the IP address) for a friendly multiplayer environment.*

Epic loot

I just wanted to thank *PC Gamer* for making my holiday season this year. Although I obviously knew of it, I had never looked into a digital distribution service like Steam; but when I saw mention on your Facebook page of some of the great one-day sales that Steam was offering, I decided to go check it out, and was that ever a great decision!

Over the next week or so, I was able to buy *Dawn of War II*, *Medieval II: Total War*, *Red Faction: Guerrilla*, *Torchlight*, *Mirror's Edge*, *Audiosurf*, *Defense Grid: The Awakening*, *Osmos*, *Braid*, *Portal*, *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind Game of the Year Edition* and the complete *Sam and Max*—for about $80 total. By comparison, buying just *Dawn of War II* at retail would have cost me $50. I can't thank you guys enough for opening my eyes to this!

MAX RYAN

Big Winner

Congratulations to Bryan Godbout, winner of a shiny new Core i7-870–powered Gamer Paladin PC and Asus 23.6-inch monitor from *PC Gamer* and ibuypower.com!

PRTSCN COCONUT RACER

I painted this *PC Gamer* car for the game *Nascar Racing 2003 Season* by Papyrus. **CHASE BOYER**

How Coconut Monkey can drive a racecar with no arms is a mystery to us, but PC Gamer *is proud to sponsor his quest for the checkered flag.*

10 years ago

Issue 76 April 2000

COVER STORY: Make your own *Quake*! Everything you ever wanted to know (but were afraid to ask) about how to make your own *Quake III*, *Half-Life* and *Unreal Tournament* mods, with advice from designers from Valve, Epic and id. Plus: the *PC Gamer* Readers' All-Time Top 50 list. The top five (in order): *Half-Life*, *StarCraft*, *Diablo*, *WarCraft II* and *Civ II*.

IN THE NEWS: *PCG* EIC Gary Whitta announces his departure. The top-selling PC games of 1999 were *Rollercoaster Tycoon* (719,535), *SimCity 3000* (657,513), *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire* (592,655), *Age of Empires II: Age of Kings* (469,376), and *Half-Life* (445,121). Id announces *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, Microsoft hosts a $100,000 virtual golf tournament, and designer Brian Reynolds leaves Firaxis to found Big Huge Games.

PREVIEWS: *Project IGI*, *Crimson Skies*, *SWAT 3: Battle Plan*, *War Monkeys*, *O.R.B.*, *Microsoft Baseball 2000*, *Triple Play 2000*

NOTABLE REVIEWS: *The Sims* (96%) "Startlingly original, addictive—and yes, even therapeutic—*The Sims* is the perfect way to mess up your life, in more ways than one." *NOX* (89%), *NASCAR Legends* (83%), *Pro Pinball: Fantastic Journey* (82%), *Pharaoh* (83%)

BIG LOSER: *South Park Rally* (20%) "Unique power-ups like herpes-infected prostitutes, dildo missiles, explosive diarrhea and Saddam Hussein–vision are all good for a cheap laugh, but they do little to enhance the gameplay."

HARDWARE: Gabe Newell talks up the PowerPlay protocol tech Valve developed with Cisco to improve online multiplayer gaming performance.

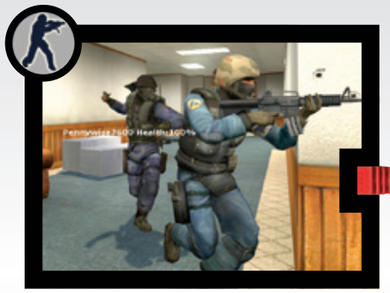
SAD PANDA'S CORRECTION BOOTH: In our review, we said that *BioShock 2* would have only disc-based copy protection. 2K has since announced that *BioShock 2* requires online activation via Games for Windows Live, with a limit of 15 installs.

THE BEST SERVERS

PLAY GROUNDS

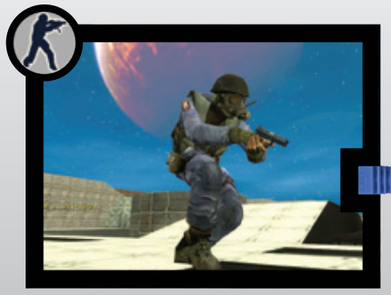
Where you game matters. Here's a shortlist of servers that won't turn you off or let you down

Servers are PC gaming's greatest natural resource. They're the places we call home: the backyard you play army in, the couch basement you cram into with your e-friends. We've scouted hundreds of online communities to highlight the ones with the most outstanding map rotation, settings, average population and friendliness to new users. Look no further, shooter pilgrims: Here's where you *should* be playing.



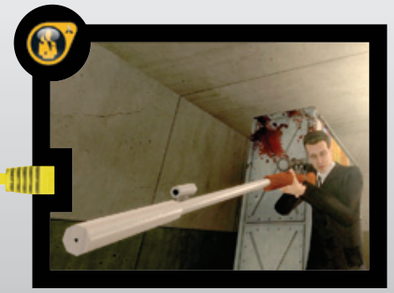
The Shooting Range

Game: *Counter-Strike: Source*
Game type: Stock
Server name: 24/7 Office N00b HIDEOUT
IP: 75.126.81.88:27015
Brief description: A dedicated, vanilla venue for *C-S*' best asymmetrical attack-and-defend map, and home to a close-knit community.



The Dive Bar

Game: *Counter-Strike: Source*
Game type: Gungame
Server name: 24/7 Gungame-5 BOOMGAMING.NET
Sever IP: 8.17.250.153:27015
Brief description: A raucous, ridiculous version of *C-S* where you shoot your way through the game's entire roster of weapons. Don't be alarmed when the server blasts Kelly Clarkson or a rap song over everyone's headsets between rounds.

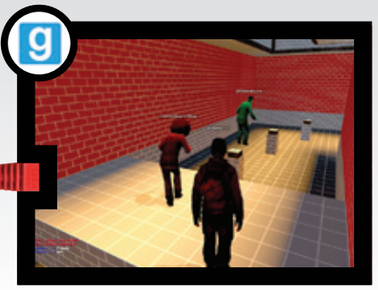


The Basement Couch

Game: *GoldenEye: Source*
Game type: Stock
Server name: .:WNx WarriorNation 3.1 HLstatsX Chicago
IP: 89.238.160.149:27017
Brief description: Home of the oldest *GE:S* clan. The server cycles randomly between game modes (like License to Kill or Man With The Golden Gun); always-on alltalk recreates that feeling of playing couchside with a few friends.

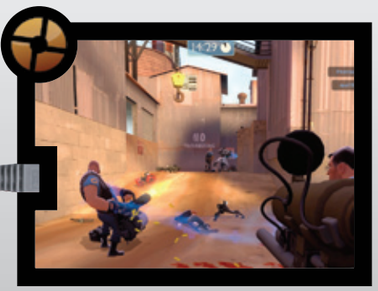
The Insane Asylum

Game: *Garry's Mod*
Game type: Deathrace
Server name: Sassilization.com Deathrun
IP: 69.175.20.178:27015
Brief description: The zaniest mod-within-*Garry's Mod*, Deathrace, is a gauntlet run of ridiculous traps, rainbow twirls and black comedy. Sassilization's server features forums, an in-game store and purchasable VIP memberships.



The Jogging Path

Game: *Garry's Mod*
Game type: Bunnyhop
Server name: Sassilization.com Bunny Hop
IP: 69.175.20.181:27015
Brief description: *Gmod* parkour. Skip-hop over ledges and obstacle courses at your own pace or race with other players. Tap F4 to use an in-game jukebox filled with hundreds of songs to keep you company.



The Nerd Lair

Game: *Team Fortress 2*
Game type: Sourcecraft
Server name: Jiggly's Fun House.net #3 Source-Craft Mod
IP: 8.12.18.129:27015
Brief description: *TF2* meets *World of Warcraft*...and *StarCraft*. Earn crystals and vespene gas as you rack up kills, then trade them in for stat-buffing bombs, auto-deployed sentry turrets, ability-boosting rings or consumable defensive items.

How to join a server When you click on the "Multiplayer" button on a game's main menu, nine times out of eleven, you're taken to a server browser—a list of available servers that are hosting sessions for your game.

The easiest way to add our favorite servers (for the games that use Valve's Source engine, like *Team Fortress 2*, *Counter-Strike*, *Garry's Mod* or *GoldenEye: Source*), is to use Steam's integrated server browser. To do that...

1. **Open Steam.**
2. **Click the Servers icon.**
3. **Select the Favorites tab.**
4. **Click Add a server.**
5. **Type in the IP (the numerical address unique to the server).**

Other games on our list (like *Battlefield 2* and *ArmA 2*) have proprietary server browsers that don't run through Steam. Access them through their main menu.

Have a favorite server? Send us the name, IP, and a short note about why it's a place you love spending your gaming hours, and we might share it with the world!

The Arena

Game: *Team Fortress 2*
Game type: Stock
Server name: The MaxPC/PCG Experience
Server IP: 66.151.138:27015
Brief description: Our official *TF2* server, moderated by *PC Gamer* staff and friends. Catch us on weeknights and weekend afternoons.

The Backyard Nerf War

Game: *ArmA 2*
Game type: Stock
Server name: 107.9 WKKM – The War Walrus
Server IP: 75.102.38.25:2332
Brief description: Evan's personal 12-slot *ArmA 2* server, primed for two-team tactical operations with all participants fighting in sync over Ventrilo voice chat.

The Sandbox

Game: *ArmA 2*
Game type: PvP
Server name: Bererk lab.@DAO.nu
Server IP: 94.23.217.212:2302
Brief description: One of the rare dedicated *ArmA 2* PvP servers online. 120-player capacity, and one of the few *ArmA 2* battlegrounds you can drop in and out of without dedicating hours to a single skirmish.

The Pool Party

Game: *Battlefield 2*
Game type: 24/7 Wake Island
Server name: 2F4Y.com – 24/7 WAKE ISLAND ONLY!!
Server IP: 193.93.47.105:16507
Brief description: All-day, 64-player Wake Island action. Cannonball! (No, *really*: An enemy just fired something out of a cannon at you.)

The 2010 Multiplayer Dictionary

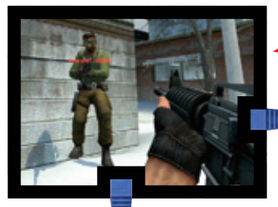
Leetspeak is dead. "Pwned" is passé. Here's a handful of our acronyms and phrases we'd encourage you to use for your next decade of gaming.

incapped Down, but not out. Short for "incapacitated." Most applicable in *Left 4 Dead*.
good use A compliment; used to appreciate when a teammate applies a consumable item or special ability (such as a Medic's Ubercharge in *TF2* or a timely pipe bomb in *L4D*) to positive ends.
ns Literally "nice shot"; to tip one's hat to one's assailant.
omw On my way.
ragequit To leave the game/server ungracefully; to retreat abruptly.
crit An attack that deals critical damage. Specifying the weapon type (e.g., "crit rocket") is recommended.
push A polite reminder that now is an acceptable moment in time to attack. May be spoken generally ("Push!") or directed at specific objectives ("Push into their spawn!").
airshot A kill executed while your enemy (and optionally, yourself) is airborne. Considered to be challenging/deserving of respect. See: "ns."
kekeke Laughter. May be substituted for "lolz" in situations where appearing evil is desirable.
rubber-banding A description of the stop-start-stop appearance of movement shown by a player who's internet connection is lagging.

The Airshot: a classic technique.

Servers 101

A millisecond-by-millisecond breakdown of what happens when you pull the trigger, starring *Counter-Strike: Source*



But if you're lagging...

1. Your computer sends a signal to the server, telling it you clicked. This signal is delayed by distance or a slow internet connection.
2. The server looks at the current position of all players and your player shooting, and sends a signal containing this information to all players on the server, including yourself. The positions have changed since you clicked, due to the time the signal took to be received.
3. Opponent's computer receives a signal telling him you fired a shot, but he has moved his player.
4. Oops, you're dead!

Health Alert!

Rickets Outbreak in Gamers!*

DO YOU:

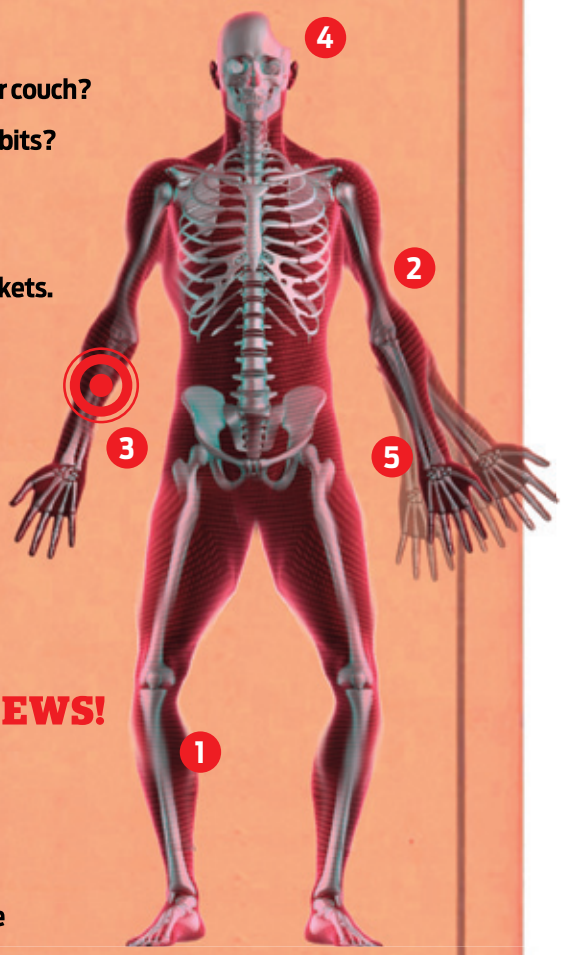
- Spend your life in a chair or couch?
- Have unhealthy eating habits?
- Avoid the sun?

BAD NEWS!

You are a prime target for rickets.

IF YOU HAVE:

1. Bowed Legs
2. Muscle Weakness
3. Bone Pain
4. Skull Deformities
5. Tetany (uncontrollable muscle spasms)



THEN WORSE NEWS!

You may have rickets.

- Go see a doctor
- Start eating healthy
- Get some sun into your life

With your help, we can prevent rickets from engulfing the gamer population!

*According to a study by Professor Simon Pearce and Tim Cheetham, of Newcastle University. Found here: http://tinyurl.com/pcghealth

The Spy

The Spy fondly remembers Paris in the springtime. His best kill ever.

The Spy can't afford to be philosophical. He's happy to leave theories of existentialism to people like Ubisoft France's head, Geoffroy Sardin, who, when his answer to a question about the status of a sequel to cult favorite *Beyond Good & Evil* was translated from his mother tongue, said cryptically: "It is always in development." The Spy's own translation came out a little differently, something involving an orangutan and a dishcloth, but his French has rusted since his time spent with la resistance in Paris.

Hard act to follow

It's impossible to follow in The Spy's footsteps: on the rare occasions that he actually walks on the floor, he covers his tracks. But it almost brought a tear to The Spy's eye—had he not had his tear ducts removed in Venezuela—to see so many people in the games industry emulating his mysterious example. As well as Geoffroy Sardin, Irrational Games' Ken Levine was getting in on the act, pointing behind people and shouting "over there!" in a bid to distract those who are sure the studio's next game will be an *X-COM* revival.

Up in the air

During December break in Morocco, The Spy received three interesting transmissions: one entitled "Last longer in bed," which he definitely deleted and didn't file away for later; and two others titled "New Intellectual Properties." Calling to the pilot, The Spy rearranged his return route, stopping at two venues on the way back to base. First call was developers inXile: set up by Interplay founder and *Fallout* co-conspirator, Brian Fargo, the studio is rumbling with work on a new game, soon to be announced for the PC. Feet clasped around the rappel rope and intel in hand, The Spy shouted to his pilot to take him next to Scotland, and to developers of *APB*, Realtime Worlds.

The Spy is putting heavy air quotes around the word "rumor" as he types this on his super-advanced wristwatch. As should you. Spy out.

SPY ILLUSTRATION: DAVID LYTTLETON; HUMAN FIGURE ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/MPABILD

The 17-word Preview* SPLIT/SECOND

Reality-show racing. Doing stunts gives you Power. Using power drops 70-story buildings on opponents' supercars.

*Everything you need to know, except why this hasn't been made into a Japanese TV show yet.

How to Win a Space War

Ironclad Games' **BLAIR FRASER** lays out a tactical plan for galactic warfare gaming

Blair Fraser

Title
Co-owner/Director, Ironclad Games

Playing
Left 4 Dead 2, *Mario Kart* Wii

Favorite board games
Race for the Galaxy, Command and Colors: Ancients: Imperial Rome

Reading
Saga of the Seven Suns: Metal Swarm, *Malazan Book of the Fallen: Toll the Hounds*.

Listening to
The Smiths, Smashing Pumpkins, K'Naan, Stars

Tale of mischief
In university, I tweaked the UNIX network so that I could pipe obscene emails to professors from my screen to the screens of victims in front of me. Believing it was their own email (it was really mine), they would freak out and provide quite the spectacle. But one day, I accidently sent one of these emails to a professor. I quickly raced to the professor's office to explain. Luckily, he laughed it off and demanded I show him how to do it so he could prank another professor.

INSIDE INFO
Ironclad Games has a title in development that *won't* be set in space.

Real space battlefields are extremely boring. Think about it: Space is a porous, huge, empty field with very few restrictions; in any fight between X-Wings, Y-Wings, Enterprises or Last Starfighters, combatants can move in any direction. And without obstacles, they can see ridiculously far. With the loss of two-dimensionality, they can organize themselves for insane amounts of focus fire. Without friction or diffraction, weapons have an effective infinite range.

You get the idea. When creating a space strategy game, designers are essentially in a position to create, alter and exaggerate things (like nebulae being used as a cloaking field) to compensate for space's inability to support fundamental strategic and tactical elements.

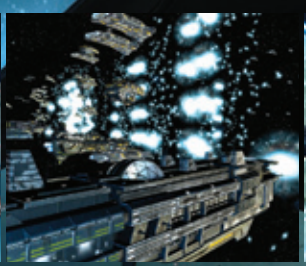
Blocking, cover, choke points or front lines, flanking, protection of rear line units, minimizing surface area of attack, use of formations, pinning and trapping all wouldn't be possible in a purely realistic "space" space. And these all apply at both the tactical and strategic level—take any cool battle or grand war plan from the past and consider the strategies employed: Cannae? Trafalgar? Battle of the Atlantic? Operation Cobra? Desert Storm? Without landmarks, gravity, elevation, or any obstacles to design tactics around, you'd be hard-pressed to re-create the scale and challenge of these battles in the void of black space.

It's taken a while for me to understand this. When I booted up *StarCraft* for the first time in college, I couldn't believe how Blizzard had designed it. Crystals growing out of space stations? Goofy battleships the size of a squad of space marines? *What the heck are these floating space islands?* But after years of pondering some of the same issues with *Sins of a Solar Empire*, I realized that Blizzard simply recognized the issues inherent to space strategy games. Terrain is the key one.

Space strategy game designers are forced to make concessions in order to bring back all the wonderful tactical and strategic elements offered by terrain and somehow make them work in space without totally destroying the illusion that maybe this *is* a valid way to build an empire in space. Drastically reducing the scale, absurdly increasing the density, minimizing 3D movement, adding weapon and sight ranges, overpopulating space terrain (asteroids, black holes), adding spacey elements that duplicate terrestrial limitations (nebulae disrupting sensors), changing physics (capital ships as boats and strikecraft as WWII fighters), changing the rules for star travel (star gate or wormhole choke points), creating "silver bullet" sci-fi versions of magic that can basically do anything (nanobots to hold units in place or cloaking to hide them) and so forth. At some level, this all helps bring terrain or its effects back into the game.

I'm as guilty as the next guy for propagating some of the most nonsensical interpretations of space strategy out there, but there are certain advantages to grabbing a trope here and borrowing someone else's interpretation there. Pop sci-fi writers (in literature and film) have already popularized their solutions and made them accessible and serviceable to their stories. As game designers we can tag along with these conventions and in turn, our games are more accessible and we have a set of tools that are serviceable to gameplay. And ultimately, gameplay is king; despite my desire for such realisms as terrain-less space battles, dynamically orbiting planets, and spherical ships, *Sins of a Solar Empire* included almost none of it. And for the same reason, I'm sure *StarCraft 2* won't abandon its floating space islands.

Ultimately, gameplay is king—despite my desire for such realisms as terrain-less space battles, dynamically orbiting planets and spherical ships...



PCG REPLAYS THE GREAT GAMES OF OLD

Classic Play, No Pay

PC Gamer picks the best games of yesterday that you can play today for free—without the inconvenience of a lengthy jail sentence

WHERE TO BAG THEM

Command & Conquer: Red Alert
Download Allied disc: http://tinyurl.com/5aob84
Download Soviet disc: http://tinyurl.com/6gl5vf

5 Days a Stranger
www.fullyramblomatic.com/5days

SkiFree
http://ski.ihoc.net

Descent
www.brothersoft.com/games/descent-for-windows.html

The Prisoner/The Prisoner 2
www.virtualapple.org

MechCommander
http://mechcommander.org

JOSH When it comes to cherished childhood games I played with my friends, there aren't a whole lot of games that can beat *SkiFree*, which gave me my first glimpse of teeth-shattering face-plants and man-eating yetis. Ski in any direction you want and feel the wind blow through your hair—that is, until the Abominable Snowman with the most impressive 40-yard dash time I've ever seen comes sprinting out of nowhere to gobble up your character.

I'll be darned if I didn't replay that game countless times, trying every conceivable plan that would let me speed past that hairy eater-of-skiers. And if that weren't enough, in between slaloming the slopes, launching off jumps and avoiding trees, you had to worry about those jerk hipster snowboarders cruising by in their backwards hats, nonchalantly cutting you off in their typical feel-good, carefree, totally oblivious style. Man, those guys were jerks.

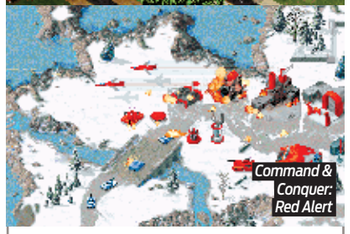
ERIK My favorite freebie from yesteryear is *Descent*. *Descent* was so much more than a space shooter—it was liberation! I played plenty of games that pimped their weak 3D graphics, but none of them held a candle to flying around abandoned mining facilities in a spaceship in three actual dimensions. Enemies could be above, below, behind and every which way. I was not thrilled, however, about my first experience with gaming-based nausea—something that a lot of people complained about at the launch of the game. But it was worth it.

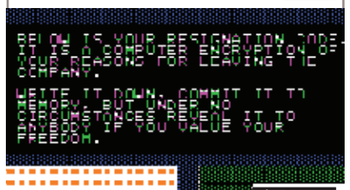
DAN I admire your dedication, Erik. Getting back into the cockpit after losing your lunch is both brave and messy. For nausea-free gaming, try *Command & Conquer: Red Alert*, which perfectly nailed the fast-paced real-time strategy formula. Sure, multiplayer eventually became all about lightning-fast tank rushes (which predate the Zerg rush by a couple of years), but the over-the-top superweapons and commando characters like Tanya made it one of the most memorable strategy games of the 90s. And let's not forget the famous intro movie featuring the Einstein/Hitler grudge match and the catchy theme song, "Hell March"!

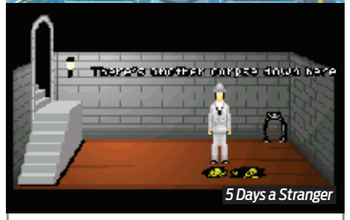
LOGAN I know that I will probably be shot for this, but I regret nothing: Among my all-time favorite games are the two games in *The Prisoner* series on the Apple II. Taking place in the same alternate universe as the TV series (but otherwise unrelated to the characters on that show), this sinister, wily, menacing and cruel game gave you a three digit code, and then challenged you to navigate the mysterious Island and its environs without surrendering the code. It was harder than you might think—every location in the game was a trap designed to wring the secret number out of you. At one point, the game appears to crash, and if you typed in the instruction that sophisticated Apple II owners would enter after a crash, you'd inadvertently cough up the number.

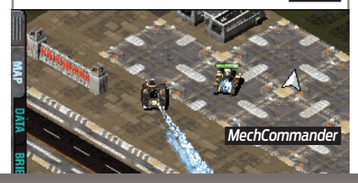
I played videogames and text adventures before then, but this was the first time that a game brought a world so vividly to life in my imagination, to the point where I'd forget that I was playing a game at all (the next would be *Ultima I*).

EVAN *MechCommander* was the purest expression of everything anyone ever loved about FASA's more-famous first-person versions of the series, *MechWarrior* (salvage, building deadly robots and shooting the arms off the damn MadCats). Over dozens of escort, search and destroy, and scouting missions, you'd develop this fantastic ownership over your Mechs and pilots as you brought home salvaged chassis, PPCs and LRMs to your garage. On top of that, the game's 2.5D isometric visuals hold up better than any tactical game of the era.









PRENTICE It was made in 2003, but it *looks* like a classic PC game, does that count? I'm talking about *5 Days a Stranger*, a point-and-click adventure game by Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw before he found fame in Zero Punctuation. An obvious throwback to the LucasArts heyday, *5 Days a Stranger* showed just how scary a few well-placed pixels and some ambient noise could be.

"This was the first time that a game brought a world so vividly to life in my imagination, to the point where I'd forget that I was playing a game."

You play as "gentleman thief" Trilby, trapped in a haunted mansion with five strangers and a gaggle of perturbed spirits. Sprinkle in a few haunting MIDI tracks, a masked killer sprite, some clever dialogue and puzzles, and you have a freeware classic that spawned a series of prequels and sequels (collectively known as the Chzo Mythos). I consider *5 Days a Stranger* to be an instant classic, because it succeeds solely on the merits of its writing and minimal effects. I guarantee this game will frighten you.

ERIK Hey, Josh, you *do* realize that you can press F to outrun the yeti, right?

JOSH You're kidding.

LOGAN LOL

FREE-TO-PLAY, THE NON-SKETCHY WAY

Remember the first time your parents took you to an all-you-can-eat buffet? Remember piling up your fifth plate of french fries and covering them with gravy and not believing that such a wonderful world could truly exist? That's Liberated Games (http://liberatedgames.org), a virtual smorgasbord of fun where you'll find links to games that have been made free or released to the public domain. And because the site refuses to host abandonware, you don't have to worry about downloading pirated games or hanging out with warez creeps.

Mod Mash-ups

Hosted by Evan Lahti

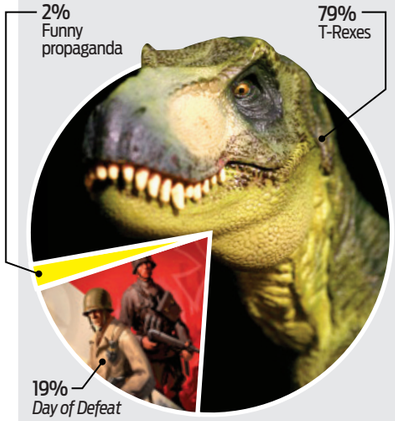
What would be the mod of Evan's dreams? A full conversion of *Twister* into *Arma 2*. Chasing tornadoes in vans and pickups through 225² kilometers of the hilly, foresty Czech Republic would be windy, dramatic bliss. Also: playable Helen Hunt.

Mods naturally lend themselves to crossovers and medium-mixing. They're appendages to existing tech; mutations and extensions of the work of others, rolled into a sticky pile of code. And because we're still hoping for a *Batman vs. Spider-Man* feature film, we dug through the mod community's best examples of mashed-up games.

DINO D-DAY

Game required: *Half-Life 2* | Single-player

MASH-UP RECIPE



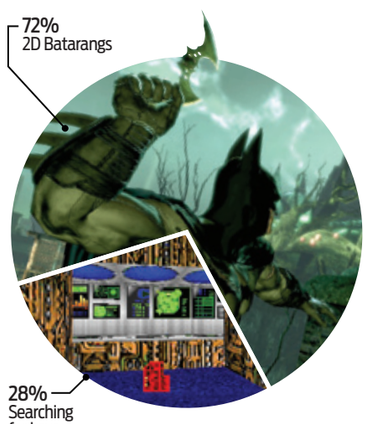
If the phrase "Hitler and dinosaurs" doesn't stir you with all the giddy excitement of a warm Christmas morn, I'd hesitate to call you human. *Dino D-Day* merges the familiar feel of WWII shooters with piles of primal, large-toothed enemies, borrowing from *Day of Defeat*'s library of voices and scenery to complete the presentation. Though only a single-level demo has been released into the wild, *Dino D-Day*'s mash-up of minefields and German machine guns with raptors and stegosauruses will have us refreshing the game's website until the next ice age, if necessary.

Get it: dinoday.com

BATMAN DOOM

Game required: *DOOM 2* | Single-player

MASH-UP RECIPE



Thirty levels of Gotham City. Two-dimensional versions of The Joker, Two Face, Scarecrow, The Penguin and Bane. A remastered soundtrack of Batman melodies in *DOOM 2*'s rocky sound palette. *Batman DOOM* was one of ACE Team's first projects (the imaginative Chilean developers that also brought us *Zeno Clash*), and though it's 12 years old, it's still probably the second-best Bat-game next to *Arkham Asylum*. Tossing batarangs is incredibly fun in id Software's engine, and the addition of creative weapons like Azrael's gloves and gas canisters alters the shooting mechanics enough to make it play like its own game.

Get it: bit.ly/batmandoom

MAX FREEMAN

Game required: *Max Payne* | Single-player

MASH-UP RECIPE

Headcrabs, not whacked-out drug addicts, killed Max Payne's wife and daughter. *Counter-Strike*'s Terrorists, not mob goons from the Punchinello family, are trafficking the drug known as Valkyr in New York City. *Max Freeman* swaps all the character models from *Max Payne* with Valve character stand-ins, producing a light parody of *Payne*'s melodramatic plot—it plays as if all of *Half-Life*'s characters got together and decided to make a high school play of *Max Payne*. Diving through a nightclub in slo-mo with dual-pistols extended in each hand is a delight, but doubly so when you're *Half-Life*'s brainy, armored scientist.

Get it: bit.ly/maxfreem

R.I.P.
Maude Hepplewhite
1927-2009

Don't get hammered by subscription fees!

Level Up with No Money Down

Fee-based MMORPGs are coughing up subscription-free ways to play

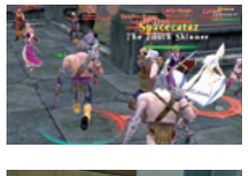
With free-to-play games sucking up potential fans, fee-based MMORPGs are beginning to incorporate free options into their games, in the hopes of turning noncommittal players into paying junkies like the rest of us.

Dungeons and Dragons Online

D&DO's pricing model got an overhaul late last year. Basic accounts are now entirely free, but many items can only be purchased with Turbine Points, which are acquired in exchange for real money. Buying any of these automatically upgrades you to Premium Player status, removing restrictions on what areas you can access, but only subscription-paying VIPs can play as all the races and classes. *www.ddo.com*

Age of Conan

Someone, somewhere waved a magic wand and removed the expiration dates of all the *Age of Conan* trial accounts created in the final two weeks of December; these players can now play for free, but only up to level 20. Still, that's the entire island of Tortage—a humongous area with 10 distinct regions. We'd be surprised if the developers didn't pull this stunt again soon. *www.ageofconan.com*



Warhammer Online

Mythic has made free trial accounts unending: you can play forever without having to pay. But—ha!—you can't level past 10. Mythic is relying on the addictive power of its game to persuade you to pay. That's a pretty low level cap, but it does give you a chute to try each of the 24 classes. *www.warhammeronline.com*

Face of Mankind

Face of Mankind recently surprised everyone with free accounts alongside subscriptions. The free accounts limit your inventory space, how far you can be promoted, what equipment you can use, and does not permit clan membership but (aside from these social humiliations) otherwise allow full access to the game. *www.fomportal.com*

release meter 0410

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING

The Cherokee tribe performed rain dances to cleanse evil spirits from the earth. With respect for these traditions, we created a game dance. When performed, our rhythm summons a torrent of games to cleanse boredom from the lands. But from the look of 2010, we may have overdone it...

Q1 2010

Aliens vs. Predator	Sega
Assassin's Creed II	Ubisoft
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	EA
Command & Conquer 4	EA
Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening	EA
Global Agenda	Hi-Rez Studios
Just Cause 2	Eidos
Lead and Gold: Gangs of the Wild West	Paradox
Napoleon: Total War	Sega
R.U.S.E.	Ubisoft
Serious Sam HD: The Second Encounter	Gotham
Splinter Cell: Conviction	Ubisoft
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat	BitComposer
Star Trek Online	Atari
Super Meat Boy	Team Meat
Supreme Commander 2	Square Enix
Warhammer 40,000 Dawn of War II: Chaos Rising	THQ

LATER 2010

Alpha Protocol ▲	Sega
APB	EA
ArmA 2: Operation Arrowhead	IDEA Games
Battlefield 1943	EA
Brink	Bethesda
Crysis 2	EA
DeathSpank	Hothead
Deus Ex 3	Eidos
Elemental: War of Magic	Stardock
Fallout: New Vegas	Bethesda
Homefront	THQ
Left 4 Dead 2: The Passing DLC	Valve
Lionheart: King's Crusade	Paradox
Max Payne 3	Rockstar
Mafia II	2K
Magicka	Paradox
Metro 2033	THQ
Mount & Blade: Warband	Paradox
Rage	Bethesda Softworks
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	TBD
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Split/Second	Disney Interactive
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
World of Warcraft: Cataclysm	Blizzard

SUIT UP

PC Gamer bagged the most explosive, exclusive screenshots of **CRYSIS 2** yet—as well as the answers on what you can expect from Crytek's monster sequel.

THE CITY

New York has been torn apart, and the damage is on a scale usually associated with Japanese monster attacks. What's left is a rotting corpse of a metropolis where enemies might be in front you, but they might also lurk above you in gouged-out office towers or below you in exposed sewers.

THE ENEMIES

Manhattan hasn't been this dangerous since the 1980s. You'll have to contend with human ground forces as well as a fairly pissed-off alien race. The alien threat must have come in all shapes and sizes to do this much damage to New York.

THE NANOSUIT 2.0

Surprise, enemies! The new nanosuit can engage two abilities at once, e.g., allowing you to combine maximum strength with maximum speed for a flying leap from one building to the next, or maximum strength with maximum armor to endure a hail of gunfire long enough to crush a group of enemies with a midsize sedan.

THE VERTICALITY

"Verticality" is wearing thin as a gaming buzzword, but given Crytek's proven skill at making the most of its environments, you can bet that your path through Manhattan will take you upward and downward (remember, that suit can *jump*) in a trajectory more complex and perilous than the jungle.

THE COVER

Cars in Manhattan will mow you down if you're not careful, but in *Crysis 2*, vehicles and other urban staples such as street dividers, kiosks and planters provide valuable cover.

THE RESOLUTION

The skyscrapers of Manhattan will help console systems manage *Crysis*' infamously detailed graphics (by reducing the required draw distance), but PC gamers—and *only* PC gamers—will see *Crysis 2* in the gloriously high detail it's capable of. And thanks to the optimizations made to improve performance, it's unlikely that you'll need a wallet-busting PC to see it.

RIVALS

PUBLISHER EA

DEVELOPER Crytek

LINK www.ea.com/games/crysis-2

RELEASE 2010

In its current state it's a slightly messy game, but an excitingly fresh one.

Because the gameplay is almost equally split between ground and space—you kind of have two avatars in *STO*: your ship, and your captain character. How long have you waited to pick out warp nacelles for your first cruiser?

A BOLD NEW ENTERPRISE

We scan the pants off **STAR TREK ONLINE**, but what is it actually like to play?

CAPTAIN'S LOG, stardate one nine two point six eight point zero point zero. This is John Luke Placard of the starship Baby Enterprise. Its continuing mission, other than changing its name: to farm strange new worlds, to kill ten new life forms, to boldly grind where thousands of men have ground before.

Having played it, I can confirm that, thankfully, *Star Trek Online* is not quite like that. The blessing and the curse of this game is that *Star Trek*, a series about travelling through space and making first contact with new forms of life, doesn't cram easily into the template of a normal MMO.

VITALS
PUBLISHER Atari
DEVELOPER Cryptic Studios
LINK www.startrekonline.com
RELEASE Out now (look for our review next month)

Star Trek is not about independent heroes, it's about close-knit crews with five main characters. It's not about shooting things in spaceships or exploring on the ground, it's about both. What Cryptic has made is a complicated, intimidating and slightly messy game, but an excitingly fresh one. And "complicated" is a compliment, of course. You spend at least half your time flying a spaceship and when you beam down for a planetside mission, you're managing four computer-controlled bridge officers of various classes in hectic phaser fights. But the real complexity is in the RPG that fits all this together. Its systems are so many and so interconnected that we're better off just drawing you a chart (see page 34).

The "messy" part is fighting on foot. Not all the animations were finalized in the build we played, and Cryptic is aware it looks horrible, but wow, it looks horrible. Melee blows seldom connect, and when people are knocked down they often flip back up to standing. I have the feeling that when this game is released, the outright bugs will be gone but the general awkwardness will remain: stiff poses, little reaction to blows, and canned amateur-dramatics death animations. Authentic to *Star Trek*, at least.

Klingon rats

CAPTAIN'S LOG, stardate three point one four one five nine. While investigating a distress call in the Kuiper Belt, we beamed aboard a damaged ship and were attacked by the Gorn. In the absence of any diamonds, gunpowder or bamboo, I have ordered my chief Engineer, Eight of Ten, to make use of her stronger personal shield by standing directly in front of me at all times. I plan to send my chief Science Officer, Hax, into the Gorn's disruptor fire, so that she can apply her excellent research skills to the burn wounds she receives and learn to improve our defenses.

I mentioned the bridge officers earlier—they are the most immediate difference between *STO*'s ground combat and other MMOs. You have four of your senior staff with you at all times, and you can control where they go and when they use their abilities.

On the ground, your task typically reduces to "kill a few mobs of Klingon/Gorn/Orion" and "press F on each of these three objects." But that task, happily, is always a small part of a much larger mission. *STO* is defined by its enormous multi-stage adventures (which are called "episodes"), beaming from ship to planet to space station to enemy ship to holodeck and—occasionally—backwards through time. That oscillation generally keeps things fresh; and even within the ground sections, you're free to explore the terrain and discover anomalies, traders and even mission-givers out in the wilds.

But the combat itself is a little too beat-em-up for a *Star Trek* game. It's definitely one of the downsides of Cryptic co-opting much of its own engine tech/combat style from *Champions Online* into the world of phasers and exploding computer consoles. At higher levels, your bridge crew might include a Combat Engineer kit with so many different grenade types that you could be lobbing explosives continuously, without ever having to wait for their individual cooldown times to expire. An Engineer with a different loadout could deploy turrets, shield barriers and healing stations; Scientists revive crewmates and undermine enemy weapons; Tactical Officers sneak, and even use close-combat moves.

The upshot of *STO*'s system is that your role can change with a good bit of loot: most of the best kits are rewards for story missions. Helping out a tech-savvy race usually earns you a great Engineering kit as part of your reward. If you've messed around with class mods in *Borderlands*, it's a more extreme version of that system.

Heavy assault weapons don't feel very Starfleet.

Our biggest concern is how poorly these sorts of combat mechanics will capture what devoted *Star Trek* fans know of the franchise's style of combat. Tossing grenades, dropping turrets, and debuffing enemies with a tricorder puts you in a position to convince yourself that Starfleet has become a military organization, where beaming down for a single mission means burning dozens of

Knock-downs play a big role in personal combat.

Each weapon has a melee attack. With phasers you just punch.

"Look at it this way: They'd be crazy to follow us."

Klingon warrior with your handheld beams. That's just not *Star Trek*. I found myself itching to get back into space.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, stardate two five point one two point two zero zero nine. Without consulting my tactical officers or Starfleet manuals, I have decided to arbitrarily switch the ship's photon torpedo launcher with its rear phaser bank, crippling our ability to torpedo enemy hulls once their shields are down. My reasoning is threefold: 1) It's Tuesday, 2) I'm bored, and 3) I am fascinated by that stern Vulcan woman in Engineering and will devise any excuse to talk to her.

In space, you have an overwhelming amount of flexibility in how you fit, configure and crew your ship. There are masses of different modules to fit it with, many ways to fit any given set of them, and many ways to use any given fitting. At its most basic, you close in on enemy ships fairly slowly, pelt one side of their shields with phaser fire until they go down, then try to stay on their weak side long enough to launch torpedoes that'll rip through their hull.

You'll often beam aboard NPC ships to sort out their problems.

My bizarre setup actually sort of worked. Dual phasers rip through shields brilliantly on approach, so if you're in a group, your friends can torpedo the exposed enemy hull right away. If not, you have to come about as quickly as possible to figuratively defecate photons in your enemy's face before he can escape.

Pulling off ridiculous feats like this means tweaking your ship's power levels and using every special ability of your bridge crew. You control the precise distribution of power between your ship's engines, shields, weapons and auxiliary functions, and every fight requires frequent adjustments.

I pump all my energy into Weapons on approach. Once their shields are down, I put some into Auxiliary and have Science Officer Hax activate my tractor beam to lock them in place. As a Tactical captain, one of my own abilities enables me to turn the ship very sharply, so I use that to spin around. While we turn, my Tactical officer Commander Biker loads a triple volley of photon torpedoes to make the next shot really count. I route all power to weapons before firing, and that's usually enough.

The enemy ship buckles, ruptures and finally goes critical, at which point we have until yesterday to get the everliving Christ out of the way. A warp core breach is a catastrophic event for everything in the vicinity, so it's lucky my Engineer Eight of Ten has the Emergency Power To Engines ability: a massive speed boost to rocket us clear of the blast.

I'll be honest—it rarely pans out this way. Although movement and turning is slow and strategic in *Star Trek Online*'s space battles, you're fighting five or six ships at once, often with several teammates, and everything is moving in three dimensions. It's chaotic.

Career Choices The classes in full

STARFLEET CAPTAIN

Tactical Stealth and damage.	**SOLDIER**	Boosts your party's damage
	SECURITY	Boosts your own damage, hugely
	SPEC OPS	Uses stealth and melee attacks
Engineering Shields and deployables.	**FABRICATOR**	Deploys turrets and shields
	TECHNICIAN	Boosts friendly shields
	COMBAT ENGINEER	Mines, grenades and explosives
Science Healing and debuffs.	**MEDIC**	Heals and revives party
	RESEARCHER	Weakens and confuses enemies
	SCIENTIST	Crowd control with stasis fields

Star Trek Online for Beginners How the game's ridiculous number of systems fit together

START HERE

YOUR SHIP You unlock more specialized ones as you gain ranks, but you keep your old ones and can switch back to them.

CAPTAIN This is you. You can choose any major Starfleet race, invent your own, and customize your face and uniform.

YOUR BRIDGE CREW Four unique officers of various classes. You name them, customize them and spend their skillpoints.

YOUR POWERS Bought with skill points, these are abilities you can only use aboard a space ship. "Evasive Maneuvers" lets your ship turn very sharply for a time.

YOUR WEAPONS You take two weapons on away missions, each with two attacks. A Phase Rifle has a standard beam and a dual-beam attack.

YOUR ABILITIES Tricks to give you an edge in ground combat, such as briefly improved accuracy.

YOUR KIT A kit is a single item that grants bonuses and special abilities, such as placing a stationary shield for cover.

YOUR SHIP'S MODULES All ships can be fitted with an Engine, Shields, and a Deflector Dish. Some have more slots for forward or rear weapons than others.

YOUR SHIP'S SEATS You can only use Bridge Crew if they have a console to sit at. A Lieutenant level Tactical seat only lets a Tactical officer use up to two of his abilities.

THEIR POWERS In space, your bridge crew have abilities you can't learn, so they're particularly vital to use. Rotate Shield Frequency lets you turn the damaged bits of your shield away from danger.

THEIR WEAPONS One each, you pick what to give them.

THEIR ABILITIES You choose where and when to activate them.

Getting promoted

CAPTAIN'S LOG, stardate four point eight point one five point one six point two three point four two. The damaged ship's crew are saved, the Gorn are defeated, and Hax was only incapacitated six or twenty times. For my extraordinary bravery, Starfleet have promoted me to Lieutenant Commander. I'd like to this opportunity to say to all of the men, women and Bolians of the Starship Enterprise: Now I can fly Escort ships, bitches!

You progress in *Star Trek Online* in about fifty hundred different ways at once.

You progress in *Star Trek Online* in about fifty hundred different ways at once. The most basic is that you're promoted through Starfleet, from Lieutenant all the way up to Admiral: five ranks, with ten "grades" within each. The main privilege of rank is a new starship at each of the major milestones, or at least the opportunity to learn how to fly one. *STO* is much more about skills than levels. Skills cover space combat abilities, ground combat abilities, passive skills such as the damage you can inflict with phasers, and your ability to pilot different classes of ships.

There are 16 basic hulls, from the generic starter ship to the six ultra-specialized Admiral-level craft. Broadly speaking, Escort vessels are the speedy damage dealers, Science vessels offer support and can target specific bits of enemy ships, and Cruisers have large crews and strong shields, making them durable and versatile. Anyone can learn to fly any ship, and its modules and your own abilities define its role much more than its basic type.

But even with this excitement about space, there's no avoiding the ground combat in *Star Trek Online*, no denying that it's ropey in its current state, and no real chance it'll be brilliant by release. If it were most of the game, I'd be worried. But from my experience, you spend more of your time flying an awesome customized Starfleet craft around a spectacular galaxy, cultivating a five-man cast of officers with unique talents and getting mixed up in wonderfully convoluted stories.

It's the ridiculous level of freedom you have that most excites me—in leveling up your character, fitting out your ship and cherry-picking your crew. I've changed my mind three times about what kind of captain I'm going to make first, and I never really dared hope we might get a *Star Trek* game that would inspire such a geek-out in me.

If I'm wrong, and the ground combat does ruin it, at least I know there's an emote for the occasion: /facepalm makes your character do a pitch-perfect impression of Captain Picard's classic expression of exasperation and dismay (bit.ly/YzVlR). **TOM FRANCIS**

The Enterprise is a Cruiser—Escort ships like this are sleeker.

Green is usually the "bad guy" weapon color in *Star Trek*.

MORE-IGINS

Farewell, Ferelden! BioWare tells us why **DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS — AWAKENING** is moving the game to a whole new world

The Architect. Bad guy or ally?

Never breed spiders with scorpions.

The Inferno Golem knows no fear. Except rain.

Interrupting Dragon Church has grave consequences.

You'll have the option to re-spec characters before beginning *Awakening*.

Awakening's environs seem a little less settled in familiar medieval art.

We hate waiting. And so does BioWare, thank goodness: Not even four months after *Dragon Age* captured our sword-lovin' hearts, the Canadian developer is pushing out a full expansion to our 2009 Game of the Year. And the game's Online Producer, Fernando Melo, gave us the scoop on what new threats, party members and updates we should expect from *Dragon Age: Origins — Awakening*.

ERIK BELSAAS

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER BioWare
LINK www.dragonage.bioware.com/awakening
RELEASE March 16

PC Gamer: We're oh-so-very attached to the characters we developed over 60 hours of Dragon-Aging. Give us some good news, please: Our imported heroes will retain all their shiny items and stats, right?

Fernando Melo: Importing your *DA:O* hero will indeed bring across their likeness as well as stats, skills, talents, spells, specializations and most items. If your imported character's level is below the minimum for *Awakening*, then you will gain additional levels when starting your campaign.

Will *Awakening* continue in a similar way to *Mass Effect 2*? Meaning, if players choose to use their current character for the expansion instead of starting a new one, will any of their choices affect the *Awakening* game world?
Absolutely. Even though *Awakening* is set after the Blight in a new area and it has its own plot, there are consequences that stick to you from *Origins*. One of the earliest examples you will see in *Awakening* pertains to the choices you made at the end of *Origins*. Other examples relate to party members—while only one party member from *Origins* joins you in *Awakening*, you will find a few cameo appearances. How those turn out depends on some of the choices you made in *Origins*.

Gotcha. But is the expansion self-contained? Or will we be able to return to Ferelden and continue exploring the world (and maybe tackle side quests that we hadn't finished)?
It is modular. The events of *Awakening* take place months after the end of the Blight in *Origins*, and after you've relocated to a new area of the world—Amaranthine. Behind the scenes, *Awakening* has a lot of resources for the new items and abilities that are exclusive to Awakening. As such, there is not a way for you to return to Ferelden.

If players start a new Orlesian Grey Warden, will they get an origin story or jump straight into the same point as players who use an existing character?
It isn't the same as an origin story in *Origins*, where you played a one- to two-hour prelude. With *Awakening*, you arrive at the same point as your imported hero would. The key difference is that the Orlesian role allows us to provide a fresh perspective to the events of the Blight, as well as uncover more lore from Orlais.

We keep hearing about The Architect. Is he going to be a villain, or will players be able to ultimately side with The Architect and help him succeed? What threat does he pose in contrast to the Darkspawn?
Those are great questions! [laughs]

Aren't they? If it's true, we'll be glad to have a genuine "villain" in *DA* other than the faceless Blight. But about party members: they're just as valuable as our main character, right? Why have only one of them follow us into *Awakening*?
Awakening is about your rise as the Warden Commander, and rebuilding the Order. With that in mind, it was important for us to bring in new characters that you could recruit and put through the Joining. The great thing about introducing new characters is that it allows us to grow the player's awareness of the world using the party's backgrounds and perspectives, much like we did in *Origins*.

There is one party member that *can* join you. And you'll have opportunities to meet your former comrades-in-arms and hear what they've been up to. Depending on your choices, their lives have all continued on, based on what motivates them. Whether your paths will cross at some other point in the future, only time (and choices) will tell—but not as part of *Awakening*.

Can we keep her? *Pleeeease?*

After a quick office poll, we've determined our frontrunners for party characters we want to take into *Awakening*.

22%
Your Hound
"Ah, 'Barkspawn.' Call him what you want, but he's the only one who will never leave."
—Dan

11%
Alistair
"He's moody, complains a lot, and my grandma has a crush on him. Winner."
—Evan

67%
Morrigan
"She's blows stuff up. That's just about does it for me."
—Logan

Is BioWare happy with the content produced by the modding community so far?
The *Dragon Age* toolset still has more features and content coming, but it is pretty amazing to see what the modding community has been able to do already.

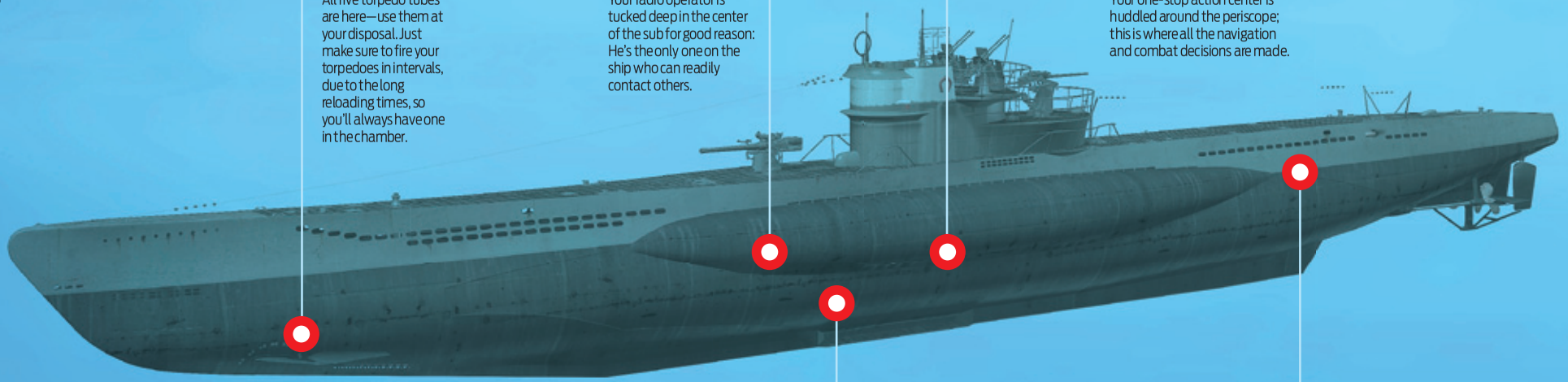
We've seen the usual types of early mods come out straight away—a nudie/underwear mod of some sort, various cheats and uber items or buffs. There is also a whole subset of content in the form of machinima, or cut-scenes, being created with our cut-scene and conversation tools that are awesome to see. We're already starting to see full content modules in development—both as modifications to *DA:O* and as new stand-alone content, and that's exciting!

How long will *Awakening* last?
There is a huge amount of replayability, but most single playthroughs I would anticipate around 12-15 hours. Side quest–happy completionists will easily exceed 20. ■

TORPEDO ROOM
All five torpedo tubes are here—use them at your disposal. Just make sure to fire your torpedoes in intervals, due to the long reloading times, so you'll always have one in the chamber.

RADIO ROOM
Your radio operator is tucked deep in the center of the sub for good reason: He's the only one on the ship who can readily contact others.

CONTROL ROOM
Your one-stop action center is huddled around the periscope; this is where all the navigation and combat decisions are made.



CREW QUARTERS
Well, what did you expect, staterooms and fresh flowers?

ENGINE ROOM
Here, your engineers tinker with your engines, getting ready to divert all power if you order an emergency crash drive.

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOTS

We dive, dive, dive into the realistic waters of SILENT HUNTER 5

I'm at 20 fathoms, on a mission to sink the unsinkable. My target is the HMS Ark Royal, a monolithic British carrier protected by a half-dozen destroyers. My crew remains tensely silent to avoid making sounds that might be detected by the carrier. Ready for my attack, I give the order to surface. Just before we break water, I realize my mistake. Due to a wee map-reading error, we inadvertently surface right in the middle of the destroyers. We desperately submerge, but not before our hulls are breached by a salvo of machine gun fire. As I move from the control room to the engine room to assess the damage, I observe an unexpected and strangely beautiful scene taking place: tmy crew, panicked but still professional, scampering about as water begins to fill the deck. As I cross from one space to the next, I watch the water rise to their knees as they focus on their respective, but ultimately hopeless tasks. Shame about that map.

Minus one on my part for historical accuracy. Nonetheless, all the details were there: real-time action (unless you choose to accelerate it during long hauls), accurate navigation tools and wavering crew morale after suspenseful hours of tracking. This is one of the many historical missions depicted in Ubisoft Romania's *Silent Hunter 5: Battle of the Atlantic*, which shoots and scores in its ambition to be the most eerily realistic installment in the series yet.

While *Silent Hunter 4: Wolves of the Pacific* shifted waters and swapped Ensigns for the Kriegsmarine, *Silent Hunter 5* returns to the classic staple of U-boats stalking the channel in the Battle of the Atlantic, World War II's European naval campaign. Most of Ubisoft Romania's changes this time around, though, are related to their faithfulness to naval authenticity. As captain of the U-boat, you're free to roam the deck, chat with the crew and even scale the realism to your preference, such as choosing limited fuel or occasionally malfunctioning torpedoes—who doesn't love those?—which are all brand-new upgrades to the series along with the campaign's new branching mission structure.

SH is notorious for being riddled with bugs, but our preview code was generally glitch-free, save for a hapless engineer who got lodged halfway into the torpedo tube. Hopefully, the final code will polish these blemishes away, so when your sub goes down amid rising water and lowered morale, you won't be able to blame the game for your fate.

PRENTICE GEDE

VITALS
PUBLISHER Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Ubisoft Romania
LINK http://silent-hunter.uk.ubi.com
RELEASE Surfacing March 5

BACK /// CONTENTS /// NEXT

The new Bradley APC is emblematic of the flexibility and mobility you'll need in *Arrowhead*'s desert war zone: It's faster than a tank, but able to bully vehicles twice its size with TOW missiles or its 25mm autocannon.

LOCK AND LOAD

We crack open **ARMA 2: OPERATION ARROWHEAD**'s cache of new weapons, tanks, and sneaky, remote-controlled robot planes

VITALS
PUBLISHER IDEA Games
DEVELOPER Bohemia Interactive
LINK www.arma2.com/arrowhead
RELEASE TBD 2010

As fictional country names go, Takistan could be better. It falls somewhere between "Hugoslavia" and "Bromania" on our list of least-convincing attempts. But in a sense, it's perfectly apt, because this blandly-named, abstracted desert region is merely a new sandbox into which the most realistic first-person shooter on the planet can unleash new tactics and new hardware. Developer Bohemia Interactive knows that fans of *ArmA 2*'s emergent gameplay will bring the rest.

Taking on the enemy in an arid desert modeled after Afghanistan requires different tools than you might have used in Chenarus, the original game's verdant facsimile of the Czech Republic. And Bohemia is keen to provide players with those new toys—including more than 100 new vehicles to leave treads in the desert with.

The Predator and an experimental helicopter drone—both unmanned air vehicles—could be game-changing additions.

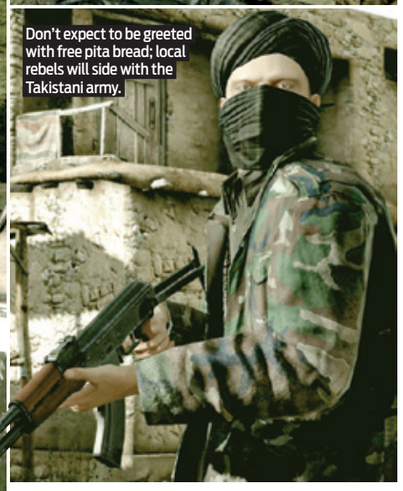
Some of the Army's (not the Marines, who were the focus of the original *ArmA 2* campaign) finest gas-guzzling equipment will be represented in the expansion, including the Stryker, a light armored vehicle that was famously deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan as a compromise between the hulky slowness of tanks and agile-but-vulnerable Humvees.

The *Arrowhead* armory also includes menacing devices like the Predator and an experimental helicopter drone called the AH-6X—these unmanned air vehicles (UAVs) could be a game-changing addition to *ArmA 2*. Until now, ground-level recon has been the reliable method for developing our tactical plans. Having an robo-eye in the sky could completely change how players tackle objectives. "If you position your helicopter in the distance, you can sneak the drone over the enemy and use the drone's laser designator to paint targets and fire missiles from your attack helicopter," says Marek Spanel, CEO of Bohemia Interactive.

Thermal imaging is the other significant new tech being integrated into the game: Infrared laser attachments, goggles and weapon sights will all fit into the system. This means that a tank that's had its engine running will appear hot on infrared, and will take time to cool off—we love the idea of a commander ordering his tanks to "power down" during a night mission to avoid being detected.

Look forward to screaming "RPG!" in new, hostile locales.

ArmA 2 is one of the last bastions of "lean" in the FPS genre.



Don't expect to be greeted with free pita bread; local rebels will side with the Takistani army.

A Bullet's Story

From muzzle to meat: A breakdown of the forces in play when a player pulls the trigger in *ArmA 2*.

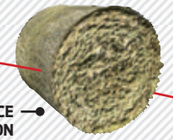
FATIGUE Firing a weapon while you're out of breath affects the steadiness of your aim.

TRACERS Some bullets are packed with a small, pyrotechnic charge. When fired, these rounds streak with an illuminating trail, granting a clear idea of their trajectory. But as in real battle, these tracers can reveal your location to other players.

SPEED OF SOUND *ArmA 2*'s audio is nuanced enough to simulate the supersonic report of certain bullets. More importantly, distance also affects acoustics, so the sound of an explosion, jet engine or rifle crackle depends on your range from the source.

DEFLECTION Depending on their angle of trajectory, bullets can ricochet off surfaces in *ArmA 2*.

SURFACE PENETRATION Different surfaces have different stopping power. This bale of hay won't save your bacon.

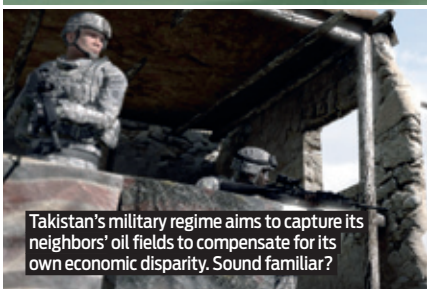


LOCATION-SENSITIVE DAMAGE *ArmA 2*'s damage modeling goes beyond "one shot kill" bullets: An arm wound will hamper an enemy's aim; a leg shot can prevent them from running or even walking.

DROP Calculated from velocity, distance and gravity. Rounds fired from silenced weapons tend to drop significantly.

Imitating their favorite rap stars, these militia are rolling in a modified Land Rover.

Thermal vision: seen through the hovering eyes of a Predator drone.


Takistan's military regime aims to capture its neighbors' oil fields to compensate for its own economic disparity. Sound familiar?

This is my rifle, this is my gun

Disassembling the SCAR-L, our favorite new toy in *Operation Arrowhead*

80 NEW GUNS Including model variants (like a grenade launcher attachment), *Arrowhead* will add "about 80" new personal weapons.

HEAT VISION Go ahead, run into the bushes. Duck behind that pile of hay. Only a truly opaque surface will save you, enemy soldier, from our thermal optics!

RELOAD! The SCAR's 5.56mm ammo lacks the stopping power of 7.62mm bullets used by the AK-47 and other guns, but smaller rounds means more (30) can fit in a clip.

KABOOM Grenadiers have more fun. The FN40GL-L grenade launcher lets the common rifleman do more: knock out pesky machine gun nests or wound light vehicles at medium range.

The desert is a much different creature. "Threats are easier to spot, but the cover opportunities are sparse."

And in your hands will be about 80 new firearms (including new versions of existing guns). The expanded rifle roster spans the gap of modern-day weaps like the SCAR-L (which you may recognize as one of *Left 4 Dead 2*'s recently added weapons) to Cold War–era classics like the FN FAL on the Takistani side. Bohemia promises to add new rocket launchers, and weapon-jamming is being discussed as a possible feature.

We're excited to see what *ArmA 2*'s worldwide, world-class modding community does with these new tools and assets. We'd love to play a mission as an insurgent militia, for example, that has to evade and destroy wandering UAV search drones; or slither across the desert relying on infrared to spot threats. In Chernarus, the brunt of ground tactics required using forestry and hills to your advantage: sniping from an elevated treeline, or making a clean getaway into the shrubs after a raid. But the desert is a much different creature. "Threats are easier to spot, but the cover opportunities are sparse, which just calls for extended use of vehicles and long-range weapons," says Spanel.

In the single-player campaign (which is also playable in co-op with up to four players), players take the role of four soldiers (an airborne infantryman, a helicopter pilot, a tank commander and a Delta Force operator) across seven scenarios to defeat a totalitarian regime in what is, essentially, a mirror of modern Afghanistan. Bohemia emphasizes that the campaign will play even more to *ArmA 2*'s sandbox strengths. "We wanted to promote situations where the player is just given an objective and the rest is up to him. For example, you may help locals by delivering some goods or providing medical assistance. They may provide useful intel or a few fighters to help you cope with a difficult military task."

We're assured that this platter of fresh military content won't come without some amount of back-end improvements to *ArmA 2*'s engine. One continued complaint among players is the framerate drag that plagues action-heavy scenarios—firefights with dozens of vehicles and infantry onscreen tend to perform poorly (so much so that the modding community has developed a few of its own tools and add-ons to lower the quality of textures in Chernarus, or by making entirely new islands that play more reliably).

"Vegetation rendering is more optimized in *Arrowhead* already, and we've also designed the entire environment to be less resource-hungry," Spanel assures. "Chernarus contained over 1 million objects, Sahrani in *ArmA* was around 300 thousand. Takistan will be somewhere in between—it's pretty safe to say that *Operation Arrowhead* will treat gamers with a smoother ride."

EVAN LAHTI

STOPPING POWER At 100m, a 5.56mm round can penetrate up to 12mm of steel.

Your body type determines how quickly you can move.

Complete objectives to unlock new weapons.

This guy cranked his "History of Flossing" slider waaaay down.

Brink's promise of first-person parkour is what we're most skeptical about.

GUN FOR HIRE

BRINK knows how to encourage teamwork: bribery

There's an instinct you develop while playing *Brink*. Like hitting hotkeys to buy weapons before a round in *Counter-Strike,* or jabbing "E" to scream for a medic the instant you're hurt in *Team Fortress 2*—over time, you gain a subconscious impulse to hit the "mission" key. Doing so brings lets you check on available tasks—a radial menu of procedurally generated missions. These tasks are class-appropriate, help your team achieve their overall objective, and have a number of experience points attached as a reward.

VITALS
PUBLISHER
Splash Damage
DEVELOPER
Bethesda
LINK
brinkthegame.com
RELEASE
Fall 2010

Now that I've played with this system, I think *Brink*'s lasting contribution to gaming will be great, well-organized teamplay matches with total strangers.

Brink doesn't assign its dynamic missions automatically: A task (like blowing up a generator, or defending your base's front door) only becomes active when you select it manually. And when you think about it, assigning missions automatically just wouldn't work—your teammates need to know if you're actually going to do it, and so does the game.

Hooray for multiplayer torture! Gaming could use a new controversy.

For example: I'm a Medic. No one's hurt yet, so my only mission is to buff the health of the guy nearest me for crumbs of experience points. My pals picks the Soldier class, so the juiciest mission offered to him is planting demolition charges on a barricade that's blocking our team's progress—you'll get lots of XP for that. He accepts, and in response, *my* mission selections change. Now my top priority (for a decent amount of XP) is to keep him alive. If I accept, he'll be marked on my HUD.

My other job as a Medic is to revive incapacitated allies. I can give teammates a health injector that they can use whenever they want to—generally, when the coast is clear. But lying too long on the ground, of course, is unwise: Any enemy can smack or shoot you to finish you off, forcing you to wait and respawn.

If an enemy Operative finds you, you're in for a worse fate. He flips out what looks like an iPhone with a taser attachment and zaps you into convulsions. Eventually, your character involuntarily comes out with something like, "OK, OK, I'll tell you." With that, the Operative can now see where your entire team is through the map's walls. Hooray for multiplayer torture! Gaming could do with a new controversy.

The XP you earn for completing objectives unlocks new weapons and weapon attachments (like the aforementioned torture taser), new clothing parts to customize your look and upgrades to your abilities—both general and class-specific. The Engineer can place a turret, for example, and spend additional points to make it upgradable to a more powerful one. Or, if you want to unlock something that'll be useful no matter who you play, you can spend a point on a resuscitation injector that you'll always have when you're knocked down, Medic or not.

One of *Brink*'s best assets is that it feels like a multiplayer game even when playing solo. One feature we're still on the fence about is the much-touted SMART key, which is designed to be a magic button to hurdle your character around, over or under any obstacle, seamlessly. Let's just say it isn't yet the first-person *Assassin's Creed* I'd hoped for. Even playing as the most agile character type, I bumped into barriers I felt I should be able to vault.

But the dynamically generated, XP-incentivized objectives really do work. I always knew what I should be doing and why it was important, and even what my teammates were up to. If everyone's that clued-in, the playing-with-strangers experience could be really exciting. **TOM FRANCIS**

Kicking the throttle into reverse and firing off a few fade-away shots is one of *Naumachia*'s most consistently kinetic combat moments.

Painting that big orange target on your cockpit may have been a mistake.

STAY ON TARGET...

Pull up! Eject! Do a barrel-roll! It's a dog-fight-dog universe out there in **NAUMACHIA**

Since *Battlestar Galactica* demonstrated that tribal drums and space are natural bedfellows, everyone has been scoring their vacuum-action with pounding rhythms. Videos of space dogfighter *Naumachia* continue this rousing trend, as chunky starfighters jink and juke their way between ponderously firing capital ships.

Aurea Section, spare-time game designers buoyed by their success with their *Half-Life* slow-mo stunt/action mod *The Specialists*, are all about the combat. "Space games are focusing more on commerce dynamics or RPG elements," designer Lorenzo Pasini complains. "Each time I try one of these games, I find that good old dogfighting is underestimated." *TIE Fighter* fans, rejoice.

The team promises that the unique physics of space will play a major role, with "maneuvers unseen" in normal space-set titles, so we can look forward to using an array of gyroscopic spins and cartwheels to shake the bandit on our six.

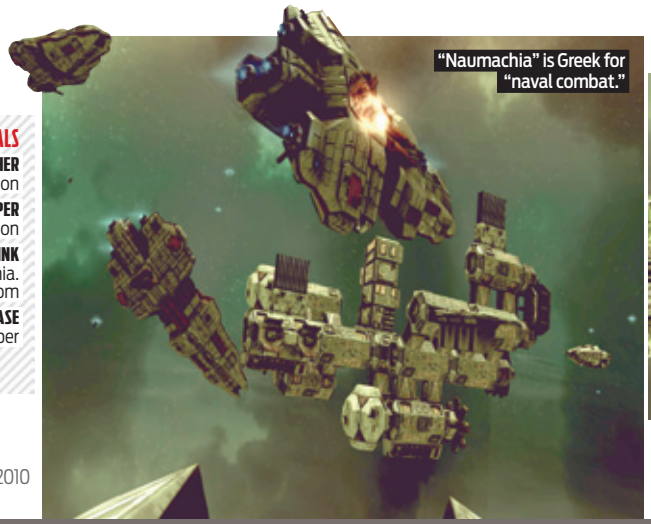
Point capture, in eight-versus-eight sessions, will be the server norm, with structures dotted around the levels to nab with your teammates. Currently, the developers are exploring a free-to-play model, where the purchase of a license will enable the progress of your pilot beyond a certain level and access to higher technology.

Each player-controlled ship has a set number of hardpoints: slots in which this new tech (Pasini lists, "Guns and missile racks, avionics, such as better radar, better engines, anti-missile counter-measures...") can be fitted to build the dogfighter of your dreams.

The more guns, the better, and they don't get much gunnier than *Naumachia*'s capital ships. Shaped like spear tips, it's fitting that their main armament is a weapon that fires huge wedges of superheated metal at any foe that pisses them off.

Players won't have hands-on control over these larger vessels, but Lorenzo explains that we can issue orders to "several wings of AI-driven fighters, dropships, corvettes, frigates and so on as they rank up during the matches." Running your own mini-fleet of vessels should sound exciting to any budding space-general, and their offensive firepower should engender some genuine strategy in both playing style and ship loadout. **RICH MCCORMICK**

The *Naumachia* team promises that the unique physics of space will play a major role.


"Naumachia" is Greek for "naval combat."

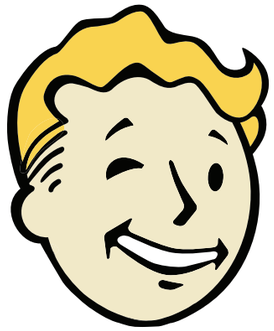
VITALS
PUBLISHER
Aurea Section
DEVELOPER
Aurea Section
LINK
www.naumachia.aureasection.com
RELEASE
July–September

Elderly graphics cards can handle *Naumachia*. The engine will downscale to DirectX 8–grade hardware, if needed.

FALLOUT NEW VEGAS

VITALS
PUBLISHER
Bethesda
DEVELOPER
Bethesda
LINK
fallout.bethsoft.com
RELEASE
Fall 2010

The acclaimed post-nuclear role-playing series returns to the west—and to the hands of veteran *Fallout* developers—for another immersive, sinfully gory adventure ***by Dan Stapleton***



You were a nobody—just some poor schmuck minding your own business as you eked out a meager existence in the post-nuclear Nevada wastelands of the year 2280. That business: schlepping miscellaneous packages from point A to point B for a few caps. So it just isn't very nice when an unknown assailant up and shoots you in the head, steals the mysterious package you were carrying and leaves you to die in a shallow desert grave (a Las Vegas tradition for 350 years).

That traumatic brain injury must've triggered a Phineas Gage–style personality change, because days later you wake up in the town of Goodsprings as a somebody—the adventurous type, ready to take on a huge, dangerous world full of giant venomous scorpions, Gremlin-like geckos, roving slavers, heavily armed super mutants, monstrous deathclaws…and some jerk with a smoking gun in one hand and your package in the other. While you initially set out to track down the molerat-bastard who ganked you and return the favor in glorious, gory slow-motion, the personal quest will soon drag you into a larger series of events that will decide the fate of the Nevada wastes. For better or for worse, it's up to you.

Few people know the look and feel of the *Fallout* universe better than the team now building RPGs at Obsidian.

Giant mutant geckos, last seen in *Fallout 2*, return in *New Vegas*. Whatever you do, don't feed them after midnight.

Obsidian's Secret Weapons

So, what exactly qualifies Obsidian, a seven-year-old studio with only three RPGs (*KotOR II, Neverwinter Nights 2* and the soon-to-be-released *Alpha Protocol*) and two expansion packs under its collective belt, to create the follow-up to Bethesda's *Fallout 3*, *PC Gamer*'s favorite game of 2008? Actually, there's practically no one *more* qualified to make *Fallout* games. Obsidian was founded by Black Isle Studios (developer of *Fallout 1* and *2*) head Feargus Urquhart, who, along with a gaggle of teammates, left Interplay to start his own shop in 2003. Included in the *Fallout: New Vegas* core team are *Fallout 2* designer Chris Avellone, now Obsidian's chief creative officer, *Planescape: Torment, Icewind Dale* and *Van Buren* (the codename for Interplay's canceled version of *Fallout 3*) designer Josh Sawyer, now *New Vegas'* project lead, and *Fallout 1* and *2* concept artist Brian Menzie. Few people know the look and feel of the *Fallout* universe better.

"A number of years from the start of the company and Bethesda and Obsidian started talking about working on a game together," recalls Urquhart. "After throwing a number of ideas back and forth, we came to the same conclusion almost simultaneously: What about Obsidian creating a *Fallout* game? It took a while to get things figured out, but in the end it all clicked, and we were off developing *New Vegas*."

VATS is back, but you still can't target the groin...

New Vegas is full of memorable landmarks. Make a right at Dinky the Dinosaur.

Melee combat just got a much-needed dose of interesting: Each weapon has an unlockable unique attack. For a few extra action points, the golf club uses "Fore!" to knock enemies flat.

In with the *New Vegas*

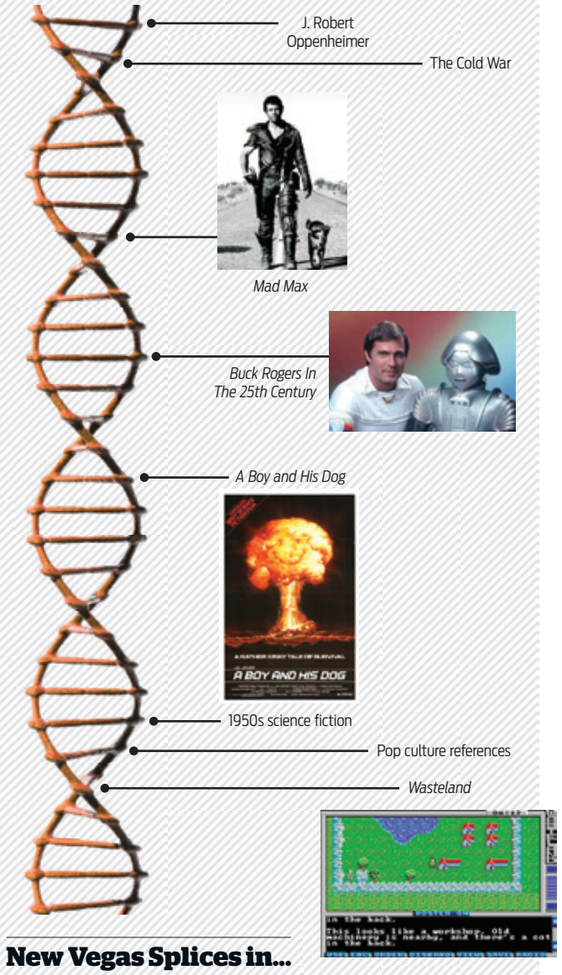
New Vegas is a huge new game world built on the foundations of *Fallout 3*. What was demonstrated at Obsidian's Irvine, California headquarters was an experience that is very similar to the "parent" game, but with a new setting, quests, weapons, enemies and several significant gameplay enhancements—from major overhauls to slight refinements.

Set three years after and 2,100 miles away from the events of *Fallout 3*, the landscape of New Vegas is familiar, yet strikingly different from the grey-and-brown ruin of Washington, D.C. Nevada wasn't as thoroughly nuked as the west coast or eastern seaboard in the apocalyptic U.S.–China war of 2077, and 200 years later, the oppressive haze has lifted from western skies to reveal bright blue with wispy white clouds during the day and dazzling red sunsets at dusk. The Mojave Desert terrain was fairly desolate to begin with (look at the area surrounding Las Vegas on Google Earth—it looks like it's *already* been nuked) but relative to the barren D.C. wastes, its lush green cacti and Joshua trees make it a veritable rainforest by comparison.

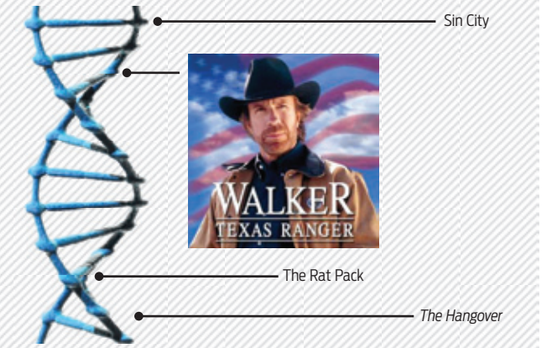
Obsidian wasn't ready to show off the New Vegas strip, but hearing Avellone excitedly describe it paints a picture of a varied and unique area. "It's a very exciting location design-wise. Vegas is like a whole city-wide amusement park. We can play on different themes, different styles. It's fun for the artists, it's fun for the designers…I don't know how much fun it's going to be for the programmers," he says.

DNA of Fallout

The genetic makeup of *Fallout*'s darkly humorous universe is influenced by dozens of sources. Here are just a few:



New Vegas Splices in...



Fallout Travel Log

Las Vegas is just the latest location to get the *Fallout* treatment. Here's where we've been so far

1 FALLOUT
Covering Black Isle's home turf of Southern California, the *Fallout* map stretched from Mt. Whitney (the presumed location of Vault 13) to the Mexican border.

2 FALLOUT 2
Migrating northward, *Fallout 2*'s map stretched from Mt. Whitney all the way up to Klamath, CA, near the Oregon border.

3 VAN BUREN
The *Fallout 3* that never was. This canceled game (known by its internal code name) was to have taken place in a wide area stretching across parts of Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, Utah and New Mexico.

4 FALLOUT: TACTICS
Unlike the pure RPGs, *Fallout: Tactics* followed a more linear path across a narrow corridor of the Midwest as the Brotherhood of Steel spread across the country.

5 FALLOUT 3
When Bethesda took over the franchise, it abandoned the notion of a huge map travelled as a red dot in favor of a contiguous first-person world. The geographical area shrunk to just Washington, D.C. and the surrounding area.

6 FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS Chris Avellone explains how Obsidian settled on the location for the new game. "We recognized that one of the strengths of *Fallout 3* was that so much of the game revolved everything around Washington, D.C. That's your signature city. And to be honest, adventuring in post-apocalyptic D.C. is interesting. You're like, OK, I get it, I know what D.C. is like in the real world, I'd like to see what it's like in the real world when mutants are running around in the streets.

"So, if we have a western version of *Fallout 3*, what's a key signature city that people will immediately get when they hear the title. And also, what's interesting to us? So individually, Vegas came up for a number of people without a community discussion about it. That kept coming up. So we said, OK, if within this small sample group that city keeps coming up, and we understand why, that's the city to use."

Machinegun + grenades = machinegun grenade launcher. Great for crowd control, parties.

The web of faction relations is interconnected, so pissing off one faction could also alienate you from their allies...or ingratiate you to their enemies.

There goes the neighborhood

The map, which is similar in size and density to *Fallout 3*'s, is controlled by numerous factions battling over the irradiated scraps of Las Vegas. From the west comes the New California Republic, a large and powerful but bureaucratic government that sprung up from Shady Sands (the first town you come across in *Fallout 1* a century earlier). From the east comes Caesar's Legion, a merciless group of slavers. In between are the Brotherhood of Steel, scattered but tough-as-nails super mutants (remnants of The Master's army from *Fallout 1* and *Fallout 2*'s Mariposa experiments), various gangs, caravan traders and isolated communities of folks just trying to survive.

And each of these groups has its own opinion of you, based on what you've done for (or to) them lately. "The Karma system is mostly the same as in *Fallout 3*, but checked less often," says Sawyer. "Mostly, we rely on reputation, because that's what people know. Karma is just a general indicator of how much of a sonofabitch you are. If you murder people in secret, your reputation doesn't go down because no one knows you did anything, so you can maintain a good reputation but your karma has tanked really heavily. Karma does influence some things, but reputation is usually what most people in the world base their opinions of you on."

In a demonstration of the early game, the town of Goodsprings came under attack by Powder Gangers, a band of escaped prisoners known for blowing things up with stolen gunpowder. Rounding up a posse and helping the townspeople make a stand against the bandits earns you acceptance among the townsfolk and bonuses like store discounts. Joining up with the attackers makes anyone left alive in Goodsprings hate you—they'll either attack you on sight, hire mercenaries to track you down, or offer tribute to buy their safety. The web of faction relations is interconnected, so pissing off one faction could also alienate you from their allies...or ingratiate you to their enemies.

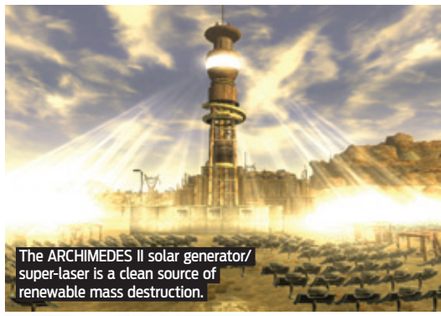
Chris Avallone's Top Fallout Memories

Obsidian's creativity guru recalls the moments that make *Fallout* great

FALLOUT: "You could talk down The Master at the end and go, 'I've gathered all the scientific research, I've talked to these people, I'm a smart guy. Good speech, now I'm going to tell you what's absolutely flawed about your plan.' And that moment that you are absolutely right was one of the most satisfying moments I've ever had in a game."

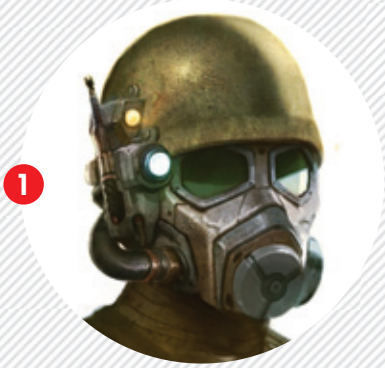
FALLOUT 2: "There's one option in the end of *Fallout 2* where you can use your speech skill to scare the Enclave guards into joining your side and helping you shoot your way out. It's a funny conversation where you use your speech skill to downplay all the horror that's about to happen. You say 'You know what, they're going to drop a bomb on this place and have us all executed,' and they say 'What? What's going on?' And you say 'Yeah, there's only one way out of here, but...' 'What, what is it?' 'Well, you'll have to join me...'"

FALLOUT 3: "Coming out of the Vault: That immediately made me understand what the gameplay experience was like. As soon as I got outside I could see at least three cool things I wanted to go explore immediately, and I knew that was going to keep happening, and that got me excited. Also, the first two dungeons I hit immediately got me excited because of the context. I like the idea of adventuring in a huge grocery store filled with raiders. That takes the real world and drops the *Mad Max* firmly on it.



The ARCHIMEDES II solar generator/ super-laser is a clean source of renewable mass destruction.

The ruined roads are reminiscent of the D.C. area, but most everything else feels unique and western.



Around the Town

1. The Nevada desert gets even harsher in the optional Hard Core mode, where dehydration becomes a factor, ammo has weight and stimpacks heal over time.

2. NCR Rangers are the roaming badasses of New Vegas. They wear modified LAPD riot gear as armor and pack some heavy firepower.

3. Sawyer credits mods with inspiring the weapon modification system, which allows you to strap on DIY additions to your guns to increase damage, ammo capacity, accuracy, rate of fire and more.

4. Raul the Ghoul is the first companion character revealed. With him in your party (which will now allow two or three members) you'll start to pick up clues that he's more than just a simple mechanic.

5. The look of the New Vegas strip is based on 1950s Las Vegas casinos, converted into a fortified city.

Conversation skillz

Another big difference in how *Vegas*' role-playing interaction works is the way Obsidian involves your skills in conversation. "Speech is a pretty common skill to use in conversation, but whenever there's something sort of skill-oriented we try to call it up in conversation when we can," says Sawyer. As an example, while rounding up his Goodsprings posse, Sawyer used his high explosives skill to convince one of the townspeople, grizzled old prospector Easy Pete, to contribute a stash of dynamite (a poor man's frag grenade) to the cause—insufficient skill would've resulted in Easy Pete deciding you were as likely to blow up yourself as the enemy, and refusing to help. Across the road, Sawyer visited the local shop and used his barter skill to convince the owner to contribute armor and ammunition by pointing out that dead customers aren't big spenders.

Obsidian's demo also explored a mountain controlled by a schizophrenic, cross-dressing super mutant and a solar power plant/orbital laser station run by a totally unqualified idiot calling himself Fantastic, presenting the player with ample opportunities to restore order or wreak havoc (nothing earns you a reputation like target practice with an orbital laser). Everything I saw looked up to the very high quality standard set by *Fallout 3,* and all of it was begging to be explored. Cynics might call a mountain of new content built on an existing engine a glorified mod, but I call it another 150-plus hours of my life (a very conservative estimate of how long I played *Fallout 3*) about to be swallowed whole by another plunge into the *Fallout* universe. ■

The Guessing Game

Even after showing off the game, Obsidian is playing a few of their cards close to the vest. While Avellone and Sawyer readily denied the existence of features like drivable vehicles or solar-powered pants, some of our questions they'd neither confirm nor deny—but we can make some educated guesses as to what might come to pass.

Will the Enclave play a role in *Fallout: New Vegas?* Our guess: They'll be around, but won't play a major part in the story.

Will this Brotherhood of Steel be closer to the original, closed-off group and different from the off-shoot version seen in *Fallout 3*, which had turned to recruiting locals to boost its numbers? Avellone let it slip that you had to be born into the Brotherhood—no joiners. Our guess: This Brotherhood will be hardcore, and much less friendly to outsiders.

Will there be different varieties of deathclaws out here? Our guess: Baby deathclaws will return, and maybe something even bigger and meaner...

With the return of *Fallout 2*'s geckos, will the Gecko Skinning perk also come back to let us earn a few extra caps from selling pelts? Our guess: damn near certain.

Are the mutated bear yao gai creatures back? Our guess: There's a bear on the NCR flag—you do the math.

The doctor that patches you up and gives you his Pip Boy also gives you a Vault 21 suit. Will you visit Vault 21? Our guess: It wouldn't be *Fallout* without a vault or two to explore. And that suit might just get you in the front door.

Will bottle caps be the only form of currency? Our guess: Our money's on poker chips being legal tender.

Sneaky and deadly, *Fallout 2*'s Nightkin are intelligent super mutants driven mad by over-use of Stealth Boy tech.

Tabitha doesn't like humans on her mountain. Tell her she's pretty and she might not squish you.

www.pcgamer.com

PC GAMER's

MMO WORLD TOUR!

Our correspondent jet-sets and globe-trots through 11 virtual worlds and reports on the state of the top 11 MMO's—find out which ones deserve a first look, a second visit, or a tourist warning from the virtual State Department. Plus: Our pro tips on getting started in each one the *right* way! ***by Josh Augustine***

They can't all be *World of Warcraft*—and I wouldn't want them to be. Scores of *WoW* clones have already risen and fallen throughout its tenure as the center of the MMO universe, and frankly, I couldn't care less about them. What gets my attention are the games that dare to be different, bringing people together in new and unique ways; games that encourage players to branch out a bit and broaden their horizons—and in doing so, broaden the scope of the MMO genre while they're at it. Whether you're a *WoW* fanatic or a diehard hater, you're missing out if you don't at least have a glance at what these other MMOs have to offer. And lucky for you, *PC Gamer*'s done all the footwork. We'll tell you which MMOs have a shot at being your next virtual world—and then tip you off on how to launch your new life in style.

"Welcome to the Fat, Blue Glowing Tree. I'll be your tour guide, Frank, the Lazer-Eyed Lizard."

AION
THE TOWER OF ETERNITY

Beauty and the wings

WHAT IS IT? Originally released in Korea in 2008, *Aion* has a distinct Eastern flair to its art style and story. There's plenty of sectioned-off PvE content available in this beautiful game world, but players are heavily encouraged to experience both PvP and PvE content while leveling up and in the endgame. *Aion* will feel familiar to veterans of *WoW* or other MMOs in some ways, but it has a knockout ace up its sleeve. Every player can sprout wings and fly, both in and out of combat, adding a whole new dimension—literally—to combat.

WHAT'S THE ENDGAME? A hefty portion of the endgame takes place in the Abyss, an area characterized by floating chunks of the shattered planet that still hold fortresses and powerful bosses. Described as PvPvE, guilds battle to capture control points in the Abyss (where having wings proves invaluable), unlocking bonuses and raid bosses for their allies. The "vE" in that recipe is the third, neutral NPC faction, the Balaur, who patrol the zone as well, fighting against one or both of the player factions.

A glimpse of the "beauty" part.

HOW GOOD IS IT? Releasing *Aion* in Asia over a year before its U.S. debut allowed NCSoft to identify and squash bugs before its western launch, resulting in a remarkably refined MMO from day one. Not only is it stable, it's also one of—if not *the*—best-looking MMOs around.

ANY PROBLEMS? Korean MMOs are notorious for their soulless grind requirements, and *Aion* carried this unfortunate tradition into the Western release. Many players got so disheartened by the exponential increase in grinding required to level that they dropped out before reaching max level. Some players with low-end computers or pokey internet connections had their epic large-scale Abyss battles turned into slide shows.

HOW HAS IT IMPROVED SINCE LAST YEAR? NCSoft has tried a few stopgap fixes to lower the obtrusive grind, but recognizes that a better solution is still needed. Quests still feel grindy as they're almost entirely of the "run here, kill this" variety. Server upgrades have greatly increased performance in high-density areas and decreased login queue times since launch.

IS IT HERE TO STAY? *Aion* isn't the *WoW*-killer some had hoped it would be, but it's found a comfortable place amongst its fellow MMOs, and should be around for a long while.

HOW SHOULD I START? *Aion* has terrific video tutorials built into the game—be sure to take advantage of those and you'll do just fine. Know that movement matters: Moving in a direction during combat gives you a related boost/penalty. Forward movement boosts attack but lowers defense, lateral movement boosts evasion but lowers damage and movement speed, and backward movement boosts defense but lowers damage and movement speed.

VERDICT

Aion has great endgame content to offer and flying is a fun new mechanic, but until they drastically lower the barrier to entry by killing the grind, you're better off with a flyby.

We just robbed the Galactic Bank for a billion-jillion isk! Let's fill our cargo holds with 80 tons of exotic dancers.

EVE ONLINE

Business in the front, party in the back

WHAT IS IT? The Wild West meets Wall Street and carpools to the future in a spaceship: *EVE Online* is truly unique in the MMO landscape. You're limited to a third-person perspective of your spaceship, but that's about the *only* limitation this extremely forward-thinking MMO places on players. Want to be a miner, diplomat, stockbroker, corporate shill, drug dealer or mercenary? All cleared for take-off; enjoy the ride. *EVE Online* provides an incredibly deep, intriguing and rewarding universe whose secret ingredient is the enthusiasm and unstoppable ingenuity of its hundreds of thousands of players.

WHAT'S THE ENDGAME? The endgame is just as diverse as every other part of the game. Many players choose to focus on PvP, fighting to expand their corporation's control over planets and solar systems, while others aspire to more peaceful goals such as growing their mining operations or climbing the corporate ladder to becoming the head of a bank.

HOW GOOD IS IT? As far as fostering meaningful social interactions and complex relationships between players goes, it might be the best game of all time. But it's not all brains—the galaxy and all of the terrestrial bodies and spaceships that inhabit it are absolutely gorgeous. If you like games where the players rule and the rules don't matter, you won't find a more established, refined

Hope you've got AAA.

world to spend your time in. It's unparalleled in the MMO space and puts all those "real life simulations" like *Second Life* to shame.

ANY PROBLEMS? Admittedly, it's difficult to get the hang of. Even with improvements to the tutorial, *EVE Online* is so different from any other MMO that there's an unavoidable learning curve as you struggle to fully understand how the universe operates, what your role is, and how you go about succeeding in such a volatile, open-ended game. As in any MMO, there are some elitist players, but most are willing to help you out if you show a genuine interest in learning the game and don't just run in asking where all of the dragons are.

HOW HAS IT IMPROVED SINCE LAST YEAR? CCP has been anything but complacent, releasing two expansions in 2009 alone (including a relaunch of the game onto store shelves). These expansions—as in all of *EVE*'s expansions—were free, and introduced (among other things) wormholes that allow players to teleport around the galaxy, a new tier of ship technology and new mission arcs. There were also complete overhauls of the game's social features, in-game web browser, and the PvP sovereignty system that lets corporations battle for ownership of and permanently affect the resources available in every planet and system in the galaxy.

IS IT HERE TO STAY? The number of active users keeps growing, and even seven years in, *EVE Online* shows no signs of losing steam anytime soon. In the past two years, *EVE* has broken its concurrent users record *ten times*, the latest record being 56,021 users logged into the game at once. CCP's other game in development—*Dust 514*, a cross-platform game that allows Xbox players to contribute to the war effort on the ground level—will only increase *EVE*'s popularity.

HOW SHOULD I START? Get connected with EVE University, an in-game group of friendly veterans that take new players under their wing and teach them the ropes. Visit www.eve-ivy.com or simply join the chat channel "E-UNI" in-game to get in contact with a representative.

VERDICT

An always surprising, delightfully deep player-driven experience awaits those dedicated enough to learn its intricacies.

"This is a stickup! Hand over every single moist towelette!"

FALLEN EARTH

Pump 'em full of lead

WHAT IS IT? A post-apocalyptic MMORPG from an independent developer with shooter combat and a focus on crafting. Choose between warring factions, tear a path on motorbikes between mutated chickens, and get ready for some gruesome violence (your first weapon is ripped out of the head of a dead guy).

WHAT'S THE ENDGAME? There are no raids and not much in the way of traditional "loot." A lot of your time at max level will be spent exploring and scavenging raw materials—mostly from nodes, not kills—to craft with. Player-organized PvP events are becoming more common.

HOW GOOD IS IT? If you like crafting, this game was made for you—95% of the items in the game can be crafted by players (crafting can be queued and proceeds while you're offline). Unlike *Tabula Rasa*, *FE*'s first- and third-person shooter combat is executed wonderfully, and most importantly, skill- and twitch-based.

Real men only need a wool vest and bare hands to tackle the apocalypse.

ANY PROBLEMS? An unforgiving character development system combined with a tougher-than-average learning curve means trouble for new players—make a mistake upgrading your character and you're pretty much stuck with it. Stiff animations definitely need some work.

HOW HAS IT IMPROVED SINCE LAST YEAR? *FE*'s gritty graphics are getting better. (There have already been three graphical updates since September.) Fun diversions such as casino games have also been added.

IS IT HERE TO STAY? Yes. While it's definitely aimed at the very specific type of player who loves crafting and doesn't want to have their hands held, it's going to please that player very, very much.

VERDICT

Endgame content is scarce, but the setting and the crafting system are a refreshing change.

"Hey guys, look at me! I'm posed just like the statue!"

EVERQUEST SENTINEL'S FATE

Respect your elder

WHAT IS IT? *Everquest* pioneered the mechanics that define the MMO genre, but its successor, *EQ2*, has had a difficult time leaving its mark, despite being less hardcore and a heckuva lot prettier than the original.

HOW GOOD IS IT? There's a lot of content; the number and size of zones is staggering. The photo-realistic art style is done well but the animations need help. Crafting is important to progression and home decorating is surprisingly addictive.

HOW HAS IT IMPROVED SINCE LAST YEAR? PvP battlegrounds and The Hole, an infamous contested dungeon area from *EQ*, were added in a recent expansion.

IS IT HERE TO STAY? Sony's subscriber numbers have been growing steadily over the past few months.

VERDICT

More closely related to lore-intensive *LotRO* than cartoony *WoW*, *EQ2* is a serious alternative with enough content to keep you adventuring for a long time.

Not pictured: hours of farming to acquire these goods.

WURM

Leave your mark

WHAT IS IT? A true sandbox experience. For example, the first tutorial on the game's official wiki describes how to gather materials to make a clay bowl and then cook a casserole with it. Yes. Everything in this free-to-play game—terrain, cities, farms, tools—is created and customized by players.

WHAT'S THE ENDGAME? Collaborate or go solo. Found a city and raise an army. Become a nomad hunter, or just make fish stew and juice for a living.

HOW GOOD IS IT? It's prettier than expected, and a terrific creative outlet—as long as you're self-motivated.

ANY PROBLEMS? If you're the kind of gamer that needs constant instruction or a constant stream of side-quests to keep you moving, this game is not your friend—it's your vicious new arch-nemesis.

VERDICT

Try it. You'll know right away if its your type of game or not. If it is, you'll feel liberated by *Wurm*'s open, no-restrictions design.

For whatever reason, Gun Babe still hasn't completed the "Rescue Vulnerable Cat from Tree" quest.

"Shave me, chainsaw robot man!"

CHAMPIONS ONLINE

KAPOW! CRACK! FWOOSH!

WHAT IS IT? Your comic book fantasy come to life, as long as you weren't the mean goth kid who dreamed of being a super villain. Just about every conceivable weapon and superpower are represented here, from martial arts to rocket launchers to laser beams shooting out of your wherever, and they all look fantastic, thanks to the game's comic book graphics and cel-shaded illustrative style.

HOW GOOD IS IT? One of the ways *CO* takes advantage of its superhero persona is by letting players create their own nemesis that attempts to thwart their hero from time to time. Even though it's all heroes, PvP exists and has some inspired *Defense of the Ancients*–esque arenas.

ANY PROBLEMS? Its tough to balance PvP in any MMO, let alone one that lets you pick and choose any abilities you want, so don't expect every showdown to be a fair fight.

IS IT HERE TO STAY? Fans' biggest gripe has been the lack of endgame content, and Cryptic's plan to make players pay for a new high-level zone just a few months after launch has further alienated their subscribers.

HOW SHOULD I START? It doesn't matter how we recommend you start, you will start by spending hours in the character creator making tons of heroic/freaky-looking superheroes before you realize that you've spent a whole week playing a game without actually playing it.

VERDICT

Cryptic needs to redeem itself in the eyes of its fans quickly, before this fun superhero simulator falls flat.

The Lord of the Rings Online: Siege of Mirkwood

Tanks before ganks

WHAT IS IT? A by-the-books, painstakingly faithful recreation of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic fantasy, *LotRO* takes its lore more seriously than most, which is both good and bad at times. Traversing The Shire and Moria and battling Trolls and Naz'gul is tasty nerd cuisine, but PvP buffs had best look elsewhere.

WHAT'S THE ENDGAME? PvE; both small group and big raid content.

HOW GOOD IS IT? The colorful but grounded graphic style brilliantly captures the feel of *Lord of the Rings*; crafting and profession systems are top notch; legendary items that can be named and that gain levels.

ANY PROBLEMS? Players can only create characters of the four "good" races. PvP has been limited to one map since launch, where half of the players control monster characters and fight the rest of the player characters.

Leaf armor: surprisingly durable.

Yup, that cavity's gonna need a filling.

HOW HAS IT IMPROVED SINCE LAST YEAR? Recent patches and the *Siege of Mirkwood* expansion have been focused on, adding more rewarding quick solo or small-group content in addition to the large-scale raids. We likey.

IS IT HERE TO STAY? We aren't at Mordor yet! As long as there is more of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic tale to tell, *LotRO* will have no problem picking up new subscribers. *LotRO* was one of the only MMOs that did not have to consolidate or shut down a single server in 2009, meaning that it has a stable or growing population.

VERDICT

Love lore and don't mind ditching PvP? Pack your bags, grab some taters and head to Mordor—*LotRO*'s what you're looking for.

Matching mounts: if they weren't so ugly it'd be cute.

Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning

The king of PvP reigns over a shrinking kingdom

WHAT IS IT? The granddaddy of orcs and elves fantasy setting in games, Warhammer is a gritty, unforgiving world seething with violence. As you might expect, there's no playing it safe in such a dark place—you're going to have to get your hands dirty in PvP. *WAR* unabashedly embraces player-vs-player combat as the foundation of every aspect of the game. You can level, find friends, and get great gear without ever hitting an NPC if you don't want to, but you'd be hard pressed to do the same without ever having to fight off a fellow player.

WHAT'S THE ENDGAME? PvP and PvE hybrid is the core component, with the Land of the Dead, described below, and large-scale PvP fortress captures playing a major part.

HOW GOOD IS IT? Over the past two years, *WAR* has stayed fairly true to its mantra of keeping PvP combat central to its gameplay and has found great ways of melding it with other elements traditionally kept segregated from PvP like professions and raid dungeons. This is a game that can afford to balance classes based on PvP performance without upsetting its audience. That's not to say everything is perfectly balanced; just that you can be sure the developer is focused on the same thing you are.

ANY PROBLEMS? The underpopulation issues that troubled us in last year's report have abated as the year's gone on. Unfortunately, that's mostly due to Mythic aggressively shutting down and consolidating servers, not more people playing. As of January 2010, there are only 4 servers left, all on the "core" ruleset (not free-for-all PvP).

HOW HAS IT IMPROVED SINCE LAST YEAR? The Land of the Dead, a PvE-PvP hybrid zone that has you constantly watching your back for enemy players while you battle through action-oriented dungeons, was a great addition to *WAR* this year, strengthening the tradition of keep-ownership and Order vs. Chaos combat.

IS IT HERE TO STAY? Player numbers may be diminishing, but we're talking about the developer that still has servers for *Ultima Online* and *Dark Age of Camelot* running. *WAR*'s player base should be fairly stable at this point but even if it continues to drop, you shouldn't have to worry about this game disappearing for a long, long time.

HOW SHOULD I START? The first thing you should know is that Mythic refers to PvP combat as "RvR" (Realm vs. Realm), because PvP combat in *WAR* is always Chaos vs. Order. Mythic recently extended its free trial to let prospective players experience all Tier 1 content, with no time limit on the accounts. Hop in and explore the game at your own pace and see if it's right for you. Type "/adjoin" to join the advice channel and get yourself started on the right foot.

VERDICT

Its player base may have shrunk, but its unique dedication to PvP first and foremost keeps this brutal fantasy MMO vibrant.

City of Heroes

Be evil. Be good. Be powerful.

WHAT IS IT? What's better than playing a super hero or villain in a fantasy game world? Playing one in a world that you created. The original superhero MMO, *City of Heroes* has been around since 2004, and has the content, polish and stable community to show for it. But last year's addition of the Mission Architect, which allows players to create and publish mission arcs for themselves and other players to play (for XP and loot), really defines this superhero/villain simulator now.

WHAT'S THE ENDGAME? This is the odd part about *CoH*: There isn't much sectioned-off endgame content, but there's a lot to do at max level. There is no abrupt change when you hit the level cap. You keep doing what you were doing before—grouping with other superheroes and learning how to tackle enemies with your unique combination of superpowers, fighting through more content to accumulate rewards and titles, touring the city for bad guys and saving the day yet again. Fans insist that unlike other MMOs, this game is "about the journey, not the destination," a sentiment supported by the 132 available character slots on each account.

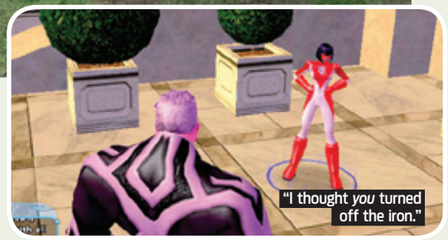
HOW GOOD IS IT? It excels at enabling you to create and play out your superhero fantasy. Allowing you to create your own content to play through is a dream come true for anyone who grew up a gamer.

ANY PROBLEMS? The game is almost six years old at this point; the graphics are dated and some desired features simply aren't possible without a complete overhaul of the game engine. Some of the community left for *Champions Online*, but *CoH* still has a solid player base (enough to make 344,000 mission arcs in the Mission Architect). The heavy reliance on instance encounters can make you feel disconnected with the rest of the game world.

HOW HAS IT IMPROVED SINCE LAST YEAR? 2009 saw three content updates, bringing new taskforce missions, power effect customization and difficulty adjustment options. But none of that compares to the introduction of player-made content. The Mission Architect is incredibly powerful and intuitive, resulting in a near-endless supply of new content to play and roleplay through at any level. Random elements ensure that your favorite missions are replayable.

IS IT HERE TO STAY? Browse the *CoH* forums and you'll notice a significant lack of whining, the sign of a very reasonable, content player base. *City of Heroes* could have easily gotten lost in the shadow of *Champions Online*, but it took bold steps not only to establish itself as a viable alternative in the superhero genre but as an exciting stand-alone MMO. The upcoming *Going Rogue* expansion is highly anticipated and should bring significant additions.

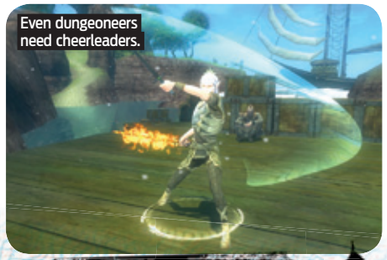
HOW SHOULD I START? Virtue and Freedom seem to be the most populated servers for heroes, with Freedom being the best option for villains, as well.


"I thought *you* turned off the iron."

Harnessing the glare of office fluorescents for evil.

VERDICT

It's not as flashy as *Champions Online*, but *City of Heroes* has unique gameplay elements that will appeal to any MMO fan, not just would-be heroes and villains.


Even dungeoneers need cheerleaders.

"Yo, middle elf, why don't you stop throwing rocks and cast?"

Dungeons & Dragons Online

It's party time, and there's no cover charge!

WHAT IS IT? *DDO* sticks to its pen-and-paper heritage closely. You won't be sprouting wings or running around picking daisies here—*DDO* is about conquering dungeons with a group of fellow adventurers and using the proceeds to conquer more dungeons.

WHAT'S THE ENDGAME? PvP barely exists; the endgame is all about epic dungeon running.

HOW GOOD IS IT? Its graphics don't compete with newer games like *Aion* and its animations are not nearly as refined as *WoW*'s, but the combat is rowdy and fun, and the game handily trounces the other free-to-play MMORPGs we've played this year.

ANY PROBLEMS? Certain classes and other content are only available to subscribers. A lot of the content is instanced.

HOW HAS IT IMPROVED SINCE LAST YEAR? In the second half of 2009, *DDO* rebranded itself as free-to-play with an optional subscription that give you most of the microtransaction content (classes, content packs) for free, as well as other perks. There's been an impressive amount of new content since then, including a new race and class, and other features like guild housing.

IS IT HERE TO STAY? Without a doubt. Over 2009, 15 million dungeons were run each month and the number of subscribers doubled. Even after tripling server capacity, Turbine still had to add two new servers to accommodate the growth.

HOW SHOULD I START? Play the limited free version and choose a solo-friendly class (identified on the character creator screen).

VERDICT

DDO offers good times for dungeon runners and fantasy fans on the cheap.

Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

Sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll

WHAT IS IT? Set in the universe of Conan the Barbarian, an intense badass by anyone's definition, *Age of Conan* escapes the fate of "just another fantasy MMO" by reveling in a brutal universe filled with enough gratuitous violence, decapitated bodies on spikes and nudity to earn a Mature rating and a scowl from the spouse.

WHAT'S THE ENDGAME? The culmination of PvP is guild members working together to gather resources and build keeps or invade the keeps of other guilds. There's a lot of PvE raid and solo dungeon content to keep the PvP-shy happy, as well.

The next cast member to run for governor of California.

Siege mammoths: practical, and more snuggly than horses.

ANY PROBLEMS? Population is low and dropping, evidenced by the continued server mergers, and to make matters worse, Funcom plans to delete sub–level 20 characters on inactive accounts. Lag still causes problems in large siege battles.

HOW HAS IT IMPROVED SINCE LAST YEAR? Funcom did a great job patching up *AoC*'s holes this past year, adding tons of new high-end content and revamping almost every aspect of the game, including itemization, crafting and class balance.

IS IT HERE TO STAY? A big expansion is being developed and tested right now for a 2010 release—a good sign for *AoC*'s longevity, despite reduced subscriber numbers. Funcom still maintains servers for *Anarchy Online*—one of the longest-running MMOs at eight years old.

HOW SHOULD I START? *AoC* lets you play through the first 20 levels of the game completely free, forever. Download away. ■

VERDICT

Age of Conan is now a much better game than you played at launch. Play the free portion, but don't get too invested until we see if the expansion can stop the subscription boat from sinking.

"Ow, stop lasering my bathing suit area!"

HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

0–30% INTOLERABLE
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31–45% WEAK
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46–60% MEDIOCRE
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

61–75% FAIR
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76–89% GOOD
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ EDITORS' CHOICE
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!

SUPREME COMMANDER 2

Armored titans clash in an epic, strategic battle. Why? Who cares?! ***by Dan Stapleton***

Most sequels can't resist the urge to add more stuff. If the first game had everything but the kitchen sink, the sequel will likely add four of them—and they'll shoot lasers instead of water. But more is not always better, especially when the original was already arguably overloaded.

Supreme Commander 2, leaner and meaner, admirably resists that urge. It ramps up the coolest aspects of *Supreme Commander*—the hundredfold armies of land, air and sea units, the awesomely monstrous experimental bots, the Armored Command Unit (ACU) player avatar, the expansive maps, the stunning strategic zoom—while stripping away things like redundant unit types and economic voodoo that stymied many players. Most of what's new works very well in focusing the gameplay on giant robots at war, though despite huge mechanized steps forward, there remain just enough flaws to keep it from completely eclipsing its predecessor.

The big board

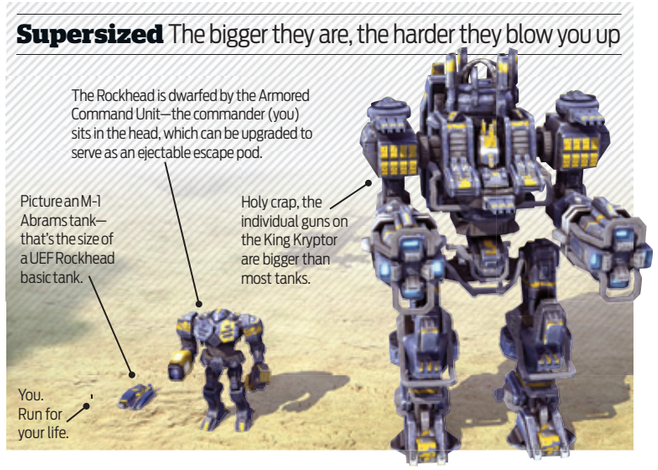
I still can't get over the awesomeness of the strategic zoom—ever since *SupCom* launched in 2007, I've spun my mouse wheel in a vain attempt to float out for a satellite's-eye-view of battle whenever I play any other strategy game (notable exception: *Sins of a Solar Empire*). Few games permit you the sense of awareness and control that *SupCom*'s engine allows, and the enhancements in *SupCom 2* (specifically the smart grouping that allows you to easily select a group of units without having to draw a box around them) make it easier to control. The interface is much improved over *SupCom,* too, with a sleeker design and better feedback.

SupCom's signature visible-from-orbit experimental units have become so essential to any successful attack they're hardly "experimental" anymore—they're a tactical necessity. In *SupCom 2*, however, you can have a "minor" experimental like a Cybran Megalith crab walker, Illuminate (the rebranded Aeon faction) Urchinow tank or UEF AC-1000 gunship deployed inside of 10 minutes. A moderate pack of normal tanks or fighter/bombers can take one down, but their imposing presence raises the stakes and the atmosphere of early battles, and each side has several to choose from.

Few games permit you the sense of awareness *SupCom*'s engine provides.

A few minutes later, you can gain access to the *major* experimentals, which do not disappoint. I was awestruck the first time I saw a towering UEF King Kryptor mega-assault bot stomp its way into an enemy base, blasting huge shockwave cannons from both arms and laying waste to everything in its path. The Illuminate Loyalty Gun is a terrifying defensive turret that can rapidly capture approaching enemy ground units at long range—even the biggest experimentals. There's also the fire-breathing Cybranasuarus Rex, the Godzilla to your enemy

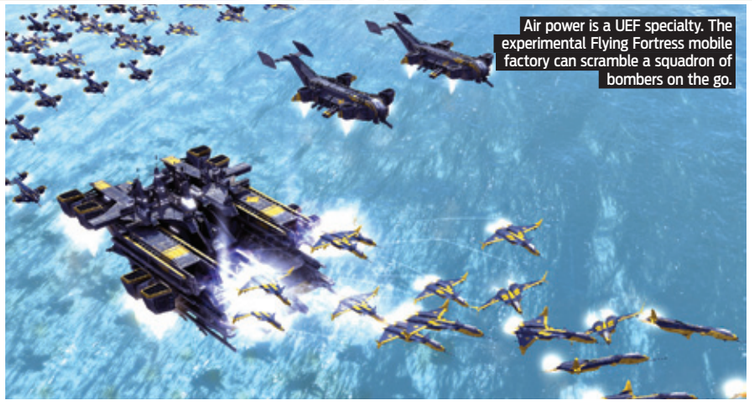
Supersized The bigger they are, the harder they blow you up



In our first game, I made the rookie mistake of sitting back and letting Erik research nukes. Note to self: Don't forget to build anti-nuke defenses.

Yeah, you're pretty much screwed at this point.

Illuminate Darkenoids are glowing Frisbees of doom.


Air power is a UEF specialty. The experimental Flying Fortress mobile factory can scramble a squadron of bombers on the go.

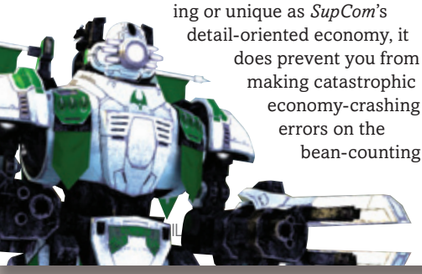
base's Tokyo, and several more beyond these. Even these units usually can't take out a well-defended base unsupported, but they'll certainly strike fear into the heart of your enemy and make you cackle maniacally as they scramble to defend against your superweapon.

The new pathfinding AI that guides your units to battle has been greatly improved, albeit not without a significant drawback: Large groups rarely get stuck trying to round corners like they did in *SupCom*—but the trade-off is that they literally push each other out of the way, sliding around without walking animations like a production of Giant Robot Death Machines On Ice.

Triple threat

SupCom 2 introduces some daring asymmetry in its three factions. For example, the UEF has powerful dedicated fighters and bombers while the Cybrans and Illuminate have more versatile fighter/bombers. The Illuminate have no naval units, instead relying on hovering units that can travel over water as easily as land. It remains to be seen exactly how well the delicate balance will hold up online, but exploring the unique tactical options of each side makes for some unpredictable and thrilling outcomes.

A simplified resource system dispenses with confounding minutia like bonuses for placing a power generator next to a unit factory, and shreds the credit card that allowed you to spend mass and energy you didn't yet have. While it's not as interesting or unique as *SupCom*'s detail-oriented economy, it does prevent you from making catastrophic economy-crashing errors on the bean-counting side, and lets you spend more of your precious brain-juices contemplating what to do with your robots. A good thing in my mind—I'm not in this to get steamrolled by an accountant.

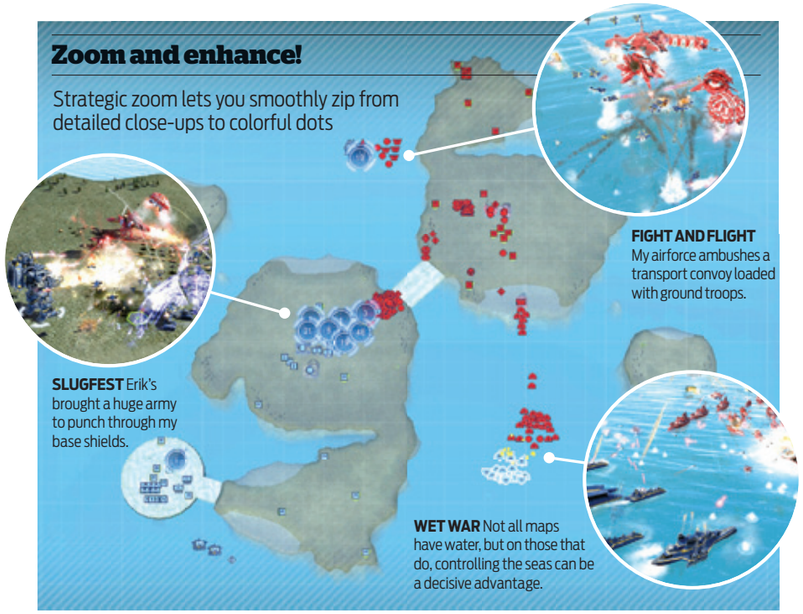


Likewise, a more conventional research tree replaces the burdensome micromanagement of upgrading individual factories. You spend research points to unlock new unit types or strengthen existing ones with improved firepower, shields and abilities such as teleportation or jump-jets. I find it a definite improvement to the flow of a game—rather than racing to tier 3 and ignoring everything in between, unlocking key units allows me to shape my strategy in a specific direction. Plus, enemy research facilities make very tempting targets in raids.

Even with the logistical downsizing, there's still so much going on that it's difficult to keep track of it all. Juggling up to 500 units over land, sea and air, managing research upgrades and build cues, securing mass resource points, scouting enemy bases, setting patrol routes, building base defenses and keeping your ACU out of harm's way is a daunting task. Effective victory depends on scouting out an enemy and identifying which ball he's dropped, and then exploiting his oversight. He might have an army of experimental units defending his base, but did he remember to build anti-nuke defenses? No? He's in for a rude, mushroom cloud–shaped awakening.

The 18 campaign missions are a good challenge, if a bit short, with a mixture of typical "kill the enemy base" fare and clever scenarios. In one, a well-defended enemy sends waves of durable engineers to capture your units and turn them against you; in another, you must destroy a Cybran naval force before it clears a blockade and escapes.

Most MP maps are small and meant, but the big 4v4 maps are carried over from *SupCom*.



The 18 missions are a good challenge, with a mixture of typical "kill the enemy base" types and clever scenarios.

I almost wish Gas Powered just dispensed with the plot entirely, rather than include what turned out to be a sloppily written, poorly voice-acted mess. The first third of the campaign is comprehensible, with a UEF commander rebelling to protect his family from a warmongering general's assault, but most of what happens after that makes precious little sense. After finishing, I'm still not entirely sure why the fighting broke out in the first place, or what the giggling weirdo villain wanted to accomplish. And the actor voicing the disembodied Cybran leader Dr. Brackman this time around is a poor imitation of the memorable, creepy performance in the first game.

Brain-powered brawn

When you finish the campaign, you'll find that skirmish AI is a useless punching bag unless you set it to its highest, shamelessly cheating setting, but multiplayer (which now relies on Steam rather than the ok-but-not-great GPGNet) is a rush. Many of the best multiplayer maps from *SupCom* return, with a few promising new ones mixed in. Now that most everyone and their mother has at least a dual-core CPU, performance isn't as much of a concern as it was three years ago—but bigger battles can still slow a mid-range quad-core to framerates in the teens, and unit AI appears to get significantly dumber and less responsive as their numbers increase. The size and scope of those battles, however, remain epic, and worth toughing out the occasional spluttering.

I do wish that they hadn't ditched the radar-stealthing and spoofing units—the counter-intelligence game was one of my favorite parts of the original—but most of the other decisions make a lot of sense. As a result, *SupCom 2* is much easier to wrap your head around and quicker to get to the good parts than *SupCom*, though still more complex and about the big-picture strategy than nearly every other strategy game in the universe.

In numbers, engineers can capture nearly anything.

This will not end well for our UEF commander...

Same battle, different view. Did I mention strategic zoom is awesome?

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A large-scale science fiction real-time strategy game with hundreds of units in play at once. **RELEASE** March 2 **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **PLAY IT ON** Quad-core CPU 2.6GHz, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 8 players **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Gas Powered **LINK** supremecommander.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Total Annihilation*, Google Earth **ALTERNATIVELY** *Supreme Commander: Forged Alliance* (91%) **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** E 10+

VERDICT

Simpler, with a more muddled story than *SupCom*, but still more complex and packing more huge mechs than any two other strategy games combined.

PC GAMER **87**

You chew your mother's nose off with that mouth?

Snorks! Why did it have to be snorks?

Let sleeping bloodsuckers lie. Or they'll eat you.

STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

The third radioactive scavenger hunt buries the needle on the creep-o-meter

I'm standing in total darkness on the rusted deck of a decades-old barge. My gaze is fixed on the line of bushes obscuring the nearby swamp. Five, six, seven sets of bright-yellow eyes emerge from the gloom, then sink back into the undergrowth. I'm terrified.

Ain't no party like a bandit party.

It's not the first time. 2007's *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* was GSC's first attempt at crafting a disquieting, alien landscape in the Ukrainian countryside. The hybrid shooter (borrowing a light quest format from RPGs) was followed by *STALKER: Clear Sky*. But it's *Call of Pripyat*'s Zone—set closer to the epicenter of the disaster—that stands as the ultimate realization.

Death metal

The action takes place in three regions, each with distinctive visual cues and their own major dangers. Underpinning them all is a constant, radioactive hum, imparted by fantastically creepy sound design and a radiation warning whenever you venture close to metal that's absorbed the blast's nastier effects.

Danger is hard-wired into the Zone, with lethal, invisible badness in the form of anomalies caused by the disaster, like the 500-meter gouge cut into a valley face, covered with a floating haze like a road on a hot day. I stepped into this trench once, and immediately the screen turned blue. My vision blurred, thumping sound and the draining of my life-force the sole reward for stumbling into such a place.

But come to an anomaly prepared, with a sturdy suit and the right kind of sensor, and you can find artifacts that sell for thousands, or provide weird bonus effects (like health regen and radiation shields) when plugged into a suit. I found myself setting aside some time every day in the Zone to poke around unearthly spots of the landscape.

Survival here is difficult, and supplies scarce. I scour each and every body—zombie, bandit, mercenary—to scrape up enough bandages and morsels of sausage to keep me sustained. The hunger mechanic remains vital but unobtrusive: don't eat and you'll take longer to recover your stamina bar, needed for life-saving sprints. Put another way: if you don't eat, something will eat you.

Just standing next to a broken tractor can melt your face.

The fallout from the disaster has done worse things to the once-human residents of the region: leaping Snorks are an acrobatic menace fond of caverns, the remnants of a gas mask giving their creepy profile a floppy, alien trunk. But Bloodsuckers are worse: with the tentacled features of a scaled-down Cthulhu and the bastardish ability to turn completely invisible, they populate marshes and tunnels and enjoy sneaking up behind you. Not since *Half-Life 2*'s headcrab zombies has a foe inspired me with such a need to get the hell away from them right now.

Nighttime is not a time for aimless wandering.

With this iteration of the Zone near-perfect in its portrayal—stark, bleak, beautiful—it's all the more crushing that the engine feels underpowered when it comes to combat. Bullets ricochet all too readily, flying unconvincingly upward after you shoot them into squishy mud. A head shot will snap the target's head back, but the hit-box feels small, leading to some frustrating engagements at distance.

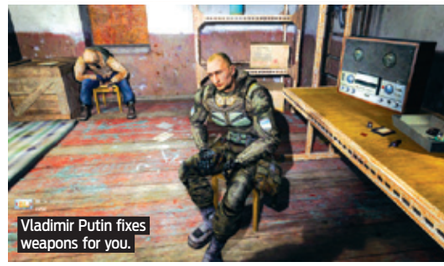
Anomalies

The flimsiness of combat is replicated in the inventory system and the PDA—the catch-all map and quest-log that forces you to dig through reams of chat text in the log to find the conversation that spawned a quest for objective details. Similarly, while nowhere as close to horrifically bug-ridden as previous *STALKER*s, *Call of Pripyat*'s AI is dangerously stupid.

But, captivated by the atmosphere, I found myself looking past these problems. In places haunting, lonely, aggressive and sad, the Zone is the most evocative environment of any game, save *BioShock*'s Rapture.

RICH MCCORMICK

Monster jazz hands!


Vladimir Putin fixes weapons for you.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** The third game in the post-disaster *STALKER* series, mixing standard FPS with a layer of light RPG **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **PLAY IT ON** 2GHz dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 32 players **PUBLISHER** Viva Media **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World **LINK** cop.stalker-game.com **INFLUENCED BY** Andrei Tarkovsky, real-life trips to Chernobyl **ALTERNATIVELY** *ArmA 2* (83%), *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* (85%) **COPY PROTECTION** SecuROM **ESRB** M

VERDICT

The astounding realization of this environment covers any mechanical cracks. It's time to venture back into the Zone.

PC GAMER 87

WINGS OF PREY

A beautiful aerial combat game that can't make up its mind

If in doubt, fire lightsabers at 'em.

The console version of this WWII flight sim was blessed with an *IL2-Sturmovik* prefix, but the publishers clearly knew they'd be playing with fire if they waved that revered title around willy-nilly on the PC. *Sturmovik* is the first and last name in combat flight simulation. For a game untouched by the saintly hands of *IL2*'s megabrain Oleg Maddox to lay claim to that title…it'd be like a hamster wearing a dog mask and going for Best in Show.

It's a different creature than Maddox's sacrosanct sim series. While there's a very serious simulation in here, *Wings of Prey* is primarily built around its arcade mode. Think *Tom Clancy's HAWX*, but set in the 1940s. It's more about accurate machine-gunning than being a hotshot pilot, and even then it'll help you keep a bead on the bogies with its all-knowing radar, targeting assistance and a small squadron of expert allies.

In arcade mode, its console heritage announces itself as unashamedly as a Kanye West interruption. It's lightweight, but only because it means to be—so it can drop you straight into, say, The Battle of Britain without getting its long johns in a twist about physics.

Serious sim

Switch to simulation mode, though, and *WoP* becomes an exhausting game of survival and deduction—no HUD beyond oft-obscured cockpit dials, no third-person camera, harshly limited ammo and fuel, the need to worry about radiator temperature.... It's damn hard, and all but unplayable without a trustworthy flight stick. Which is all well and good if you were born and bred on high-end sims, but it's absolutist in its poles of arcade and hardcore. It's a huge and intimidating switch—if you're a casual pilot, don't realistically expect to ever move out of arcade mode.

There's no shame in that, because it's a grandiose thing in either mode, for the most part. The planes are perhaps a little too shiny and weightless, and their pilots frozen and expressionless, but the sheer number of them that can dot the sky simultaneously really does the trick. Even more striking are the huge landscapes below you. *WoP*'s harrowingly beautiful besieged Stalingrad is awesomely three-dimensional, lending a sense of being in the middle of a raging war rather than just a small dog fight.

A shame, then, that *WoP* doesn't really go for it—while its mechanics are confidently simple and intuitive, the presentation it throws around the gung-ho dogfighting can be weirdly subdued. A soundtrack cranked right up to 11, a little more exaggeration to the 'splodes and it'd be a gloriously over-the-top tale of derring-do. Instead, it's opted to be stately: soporific voiceovers, a graceful but buttoned-down Jeremy Soule soundtrack and missions that often start with long, tedious commutes to the action. *Wings of Prey* wants to be *Crimson Skies*, but the lurking, unforgiving presence of that Sim mode keeps its trigger hand frustratingly tied.

It's absolutist in its poles of arcade and hardcore simulation.

WoP is an odd thing—so confident in many ways but flailing for legitimacy in others. Still, it's effectively two games in one and, for the sim crowd, it'll help to stave off the great hunger caused by the now three-year-plus wait for the real *Sturmovik* sequel, *Battle of Britain*.

ALEC MEER

I just lost the change out of my pockets.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A WWII combat flight sim **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **PLAY IT ON** 3.2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** Up to 32 **PUBLISHER** Gaijin **DEVELOPER** Gaijin **LINK** airwargame.com **INFLUENCED BY** *IL-2 Sturmovik* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Crimson Skies* (85%) **COPY PROTECTION** FrontLine ProActive, 3 machine activation limit **ESRB** T

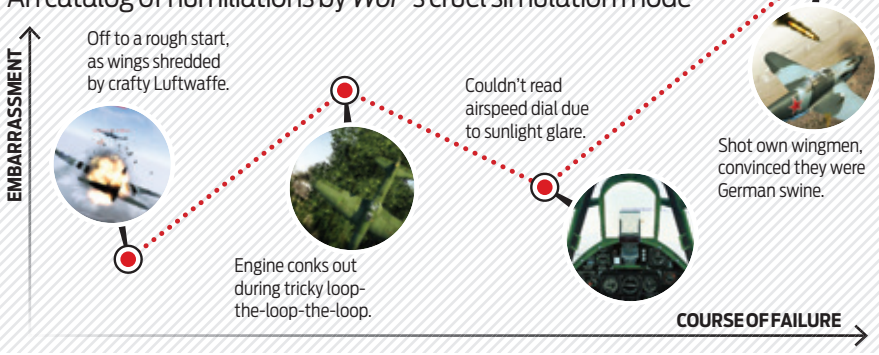
VERDICT

A rare sim triumph, although it's forced to make a ton of compromises to appease two distinct audiences.

PC GAMER **78**

Black box recorder

An catalog of humiliations by *WoP*'s cruel simulation mode



NAPOLEON: TOTAL WAR

A grand campaign, but a few cracks begin to show in the *Total War* series

If you've never tried it before, the *Total War* series offers a perfect blend of the managerial and the martial that will knock your socks off. If you have, then you've already played the best of what *Napoleon: Total War* has to offer. With all the promised changes, I hadn't expected *NTW* to feel quite so close to its 18th-century forerunner.

As in the rest of the series, you march armies around a beautiful 3D strategy map, consuming territories. When armies meet, the turn-based plotting makes way for stirring real-time carnage.

The three consecutive campaigns each take their goals from a different phase of Napoleon "Boney" Bonaparte's blood-spattered career. You'll first find yourself in Nice, gazing east at a patchwork of Northern Italian states. This dainty hors d'oeuvre is deliberately compact, focused and short. I was happily pushing the Habsburgs back across the Alps when a message popped up, reminding me there were only six turns left in which to capture distant Klagenfurt. Merde! I'd forgotten about the 40-turn time limit.

The Middle Eastern adventure that follows it has much greater replay potential—we get 60 turns to succeed where Napoleon failed in Egypt and the Levant. It's here that *NTW* really hits its stride. While some optional side-missions nudge you in the direction of victory, others mischievously lure you away from your goal.

Them is some funny-lookin' horses.

Nappy's third outing is the grandest and potentially the most pleasing. Commencing in 1805, it runs for 192 turns and encompasses all of Europe. Taking Moscow proved a disappointment, however; incredibly, playing on hard difficulty, apart from a brief scuffle at Minsk, there were no incidents of note on the long trek east. My army was never challenged nor troubled by lack of supplies. On arriving at Moscow, they overpowered the modest garrison with relative ease (although holding the city proved more difficult).

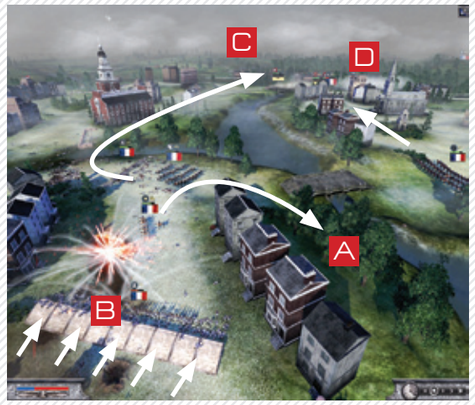
The biggest letdown was that I'd been playing and thinking exactly as in previous *Total War*s. Depleted armies will automatically replenish just about anywhere, as long as they've got a general. Supply posts are far from essential. Attrition only occurs in midwinter and in desert conditions. Elite units are immune. The enhancements that should have prevented that increasingly tiresome *TW* phenomena, the rampaging MegaKill Army, barely impacts it.

Someone tell the Turks what century it is.

The *Total War*/*Mount & Blade* merger can't come soon enough.

Decision Time in Dresden

The battle is hanging in the balance. Think Tim, *think*!



A Discrete valor One of Napoleon's personal guard party has just been slain by shrapnel. I gallop the Little Corporal around the back of these German brownstones for safekeeping.

B Hold firm! Under musket and cannon fire, the Young Guard are wavering. They'll need a "rally" boost from Boney if they're to resist the next assault.

C Mercy dash The scrap at the other bridge isn't going well. Murat's cavalry smashing into the Austrians from the rear might just save my poor fusiliers.

D Last throw It looks like there's nothing else for it but to throw my reserves into the fray. Ride, my brave Chasseurs Cheval (hunters on horseback). Ride like the wind!

Beef Wellington

Nothing I've seen so far gives me much confidence in the silicon brain pulling *NTW*'s grand-strategic levers, but the majority of tactical battles are thoroughly engaging. A few are downright sublime. Last night, I had a run-in with Wellesley near Hanover that made me proud to be French.

We were evenly matched numbers-wise, but the Brits had the quality, and half my army was arriving as reinforcements (rarely good). As it turned out, that split probably saved the day. Approaching from front and rear, my men made a bloody beef sandwich of the Redcoats. For a while, the battle might have gone either way. I rushed my general around the field to steady the nerves of wavering formations (generals have new rallying powers). It was heart-pounding, atmospheric and totally believable.

NTW also boasts an excellent 10-tussle sequence ending, logically, with Waterloo.

Priests are gone, but spies and gents have new talents.

Back in the day, drummers were vital order-transmitters.

What the engagements lack in historic accuracy (you're working with a fraction of the real headcounts) they more than make up for in spectacle, tension, and drama. Sadly, the game is ineffective at employing Napoleon's signature tactics. At the very least, CA should have given him huge deployment advantages.

One of the few areas where *NTW* is significantly superior to its predecessor is multiplayer, and the choices available are now dizzying. The multiplayer campaigns and "drop in" battles that pit you against real opponents in the tactical fights really have the potential to banish series fatigue in the blink of an eye. No more steam-rolling the AI.

But multiplayer campaigns fail to excuse the poor strategic AI. In delivering a half-hearted supply system and idiot opponents, Creative Assembly hasn't done themselves any favors, or justice to Boney. **TIM STONE**

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** Napoleon's rise and fall told using *TW*'s blend of turn-based conquest and real-time battles. **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **PLAY IT ON** Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 8 players **PUBLISHER** Sega **DEVELOPER** Creative Assembly **LINK** totalwar.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Total War 1–5*, the wee general himself **ALTERNATIVELY** *King Arthur* (86%), *Napoleon's Campaigns* (79%) **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** T

VERDICT

Not brave or bright enough to wow *Total War* veterans, but the battles and improved multiplayer save the day.

PC GAMER **82**

These guys are charmers. By which I mean they cast Charm.

Occasionally, you get a good, tense brawl.

DIVINITY II: EGO DRACONIS

A charming fantasy RPG that delays gratification a bit too long

Judging an RPG by its towns is usually a safe bet. Does the urban intrigue come so thick and fast that you get anxious about skipping a single house? That's good. Or are they a monotonous series of stone walls and side-quests? That's bad.

The first town in *Divinity II: Ego Draconis* is great. It's a cozy little place crammed with quests, scandals, oddballs and secrets, where the hick residents look up at your Dragon Slayer character with saucer eyes. Bounty-hunting and undercover missions for the rag-tag local guards blur into rumor-quashing investigations and pig burglary. Even the local baker is secretly cooking up more than just bread. It is, sadly, the standout town.

You're a Dragon Slayer in a world with almost no dragons, and when one does show up, the last thing your superiors want is for a neophyte like you to go jogging off after it. But your underdog eventually earns his own fully staffed Battle Tower and the ability to turn into a dragon with wings and fiery breath whenever you please.

Wonderfully, far from being the usual inoffensive medieval archetype, your character is a massively facetious smart aleck who talks circles around everyone else. In a great touch, you can add to this and spend experience points to read minds: You'll get a sentence of text with reverb indicating what's going on in someone's head.

Sadly, it takes at least 12 hours before you get to the dragon form. *Ego Draconis* finally opens up like a scaly flower once you can go flapping around the world with runners, an alchemist, an enchanter and even a necromancer at your beck and call. But between that lovely first town and finally getting your dragon form there are some unforgivable issues: monotonous, awkward combat with little weight or complexity; a dire lack of auto-saving coupled with unskippable cut-scenes; and vague quests with no map indicators. Much of your time is spent out in the field, watching a monster's health bar tick down or in dry dragon combat.

Which is odd. Larian Studios' predecessors to *Divinity II—Divine Divinity* and *Beyond Divinity*—were solid action RPGs, yet *Ego Draconis* finds strength in its non-combat sections. Despite their lack of clarity, the quests are creative and sparkle when it comes to dialogue and resolution. I failed an early investigative quest due to a thieving guard protesting his innocence, and a high point in the middle of the game is interviewing the candidates who'll staff your tower. The twist is that if you don't take them on, they'll die.

It's possible to squeeze past the flaws, develop a character into a mage who carries an axe, do the quests and plow through the combat. And there are secret areas that reward you for being observant. But there are better RPGs around to play first. *The Witcher: Enhanced Edition* and *Dragon Age: Origins* should both be in your collection before you pluck this from the shelf. **QUINTIN SMITH**

Rise of the dragon How to have fun in the first 12 hours

1 hour Do every quest! Deliver love letters, help the farmer get his pigs back. XP and loot are vital.

2 hours Leave the starting village for the wilderness before you start feeling like a panhandler.

3 hours Help the Necromancer track down his monsters and you'll get your own custom pet.

8 hours Enter Lord Lovis' haunted tower. Door's locked? Look up and prep your somersault jump.

10 hours Inside the Maxos Temple, you can look forward to a room that demands "feline agility!"

12 hours Dragon form and the Battle Tower are yours! Now, bathe in the glory of the game at its very best.

Time

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A light-hearted, funny dragon-slaying RPG **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **PLAY IT ON** 1.8GHz dual-core CPU, 1GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** None **PUBLISHER** DTP **DEVELOPER** Larian **LINK** divinity2.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Gothic 3*, *Oblivion* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Dragon Age: Origins* (92%) **COPY PROTECTION** None **ESRB** M

VERDICT

Not the best fantasy RPG available this year, but good enough to sate those looking for more quests and characters.

PC GAMER 71

Defilers spit nightmare ick at you, slowing movement.

THE ZOMBIE ISLAND OF DR. NED

Borderlands' DLC undead walk the walk, but don't revive gameplay

Jakob's Cove: a lovely place for a Halloween rave.

The more I play *Borderlands*, the more I want my friends to play it. Gearbox's combo of RPG and FPS works well as a single-player FPS, but here in *The Zombie Island of Dr. Ned*, *Borderlands*' first major piece of downloadable content, the new enemy zombies aren't much of a challenge for solo players because they don't arrive in large numbers until you're playing with extra players.

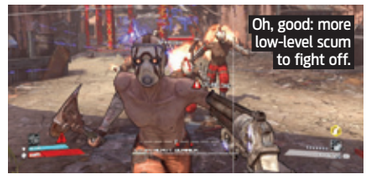
It's also a shame this didn't turn up around Halloween, because it's the best faux-gothic graveyard setting I've seen in a game. It's right up there with *World of Warcraft*'s undead zones. Not only is a zombie apocalypse going on, but there are flesh-eating crows, were-skags, pumpkin-headed monsters and zombie midgets. Secrets are hidden behind tombstones, Dr. Ned lives in a spooky tree house, and the stage set is one of hammed-up horror. The new levels are even introduced by *Borderlands'* dodgy trader character as a bedtime story for a child, who butts in to point out inconsistencies.

Zombie Island remains similar to the main game in terms of structure and activity. There are a bunch of missions to be claimed at the bounty board in the central hub, and you can head out into a number of new locations to tackle them. It scales for use with any character, but in an apparent glitch, the game scaled to around level 42 for my level-36 sniper, rendering it unassailable without teammates. I ended up playing it through with a level-20 brick, which was perfect for punching swarms of zombies to death with my explosive fists.

But a minimum of effort seems to have been applied to the design of the missions, which feel uninspired against the zombie setting. Nor is fighting these zombies particularly stimulating—they're all less exciting than *Borderlands*' basic enemies. And the fact that they make no footfall noises also means they can go unspotted until they are upon you—a bizarre oversight for a shooter of this caliber. **RICHARD COBBETT**

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $10 **PLAY IT ON** *Borderlands* **MULTIPLAYER** 4-player co-op **LINK** borderlandsthegame.com/zombieisland **PUBLISHER** 2K Games **DEVELOPER** Gearbox **COPY PROTECTION** Three activation limit **ESRB** M

PC GAMER 73



Oh, good: more low-level scum to fight off.

MAD MOXXI'S UNDERDOME RIOT

Borderlands' second DLC underwhelms

Following the more disappointing approach to DLC, *Mad Moxxi's Underdome Riot* simply sticks you in enemy-filled arenas to fight for your life against ever-increasing waves of enemies.

Moxxi pushes *Borderlands* just a little too far from its roots; shooting people and not having loot drop is very hollow. It's pretty, polished, and as colorful as *Borderlands* ever was, and it adds a bank to store loot you might want to keep. But having all the risk without the reward (until the end) really takes away what was special about the game. **CRAIG PEARSON**

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $10 **LINK** borderlandsthegame.com/madmoxxi **ESRB** M

PC GAMER 50

Grapple onto the green bits.

GRAPPLING HOOK

Tech demo with an identity crisis

Grappling Hook is just you, your grapple gun and 22 levels of cuboid puzzlement in which you use your grapple gun on green areas to escape. And often, you'll be jumping into an apparent abyss, as precision timing is everything.

It's *Portal* with no companion cube, and the levels are just bland cubes. Now and then, you'll swing past a comment scrawled on a wall ("Are you a spider monkey?") but that's the only personality in sight.

This is essentially a very promising tech demo, and you can't help feeling that we'll see a more polished version of the game in a couple of years. Better to wait until then. **RACHEL PENNY**

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $15 **LINK** ghook.speedrungames.com **ESRB** N/R

PC GAMER 59

Build your own Torchlight dungeon

Here's how you can build your own monster in **TorchED**

GET STARTED

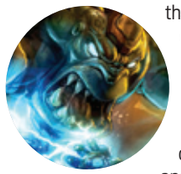
DIFFICULTY Hard
TIME 1 hour
VITAL LINKS

Download TorchED
snipurl.com/th2fz

TorchED tutorials
snipurl.com/thj6o

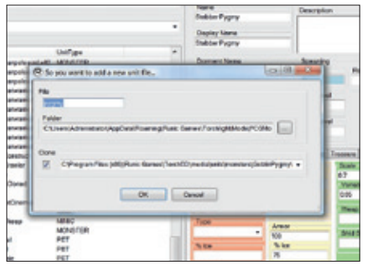
Download Torchlight Mods
snipurl.com/thj7m

TorchEX, a huge collaborative mod
snipurl.com/thjao



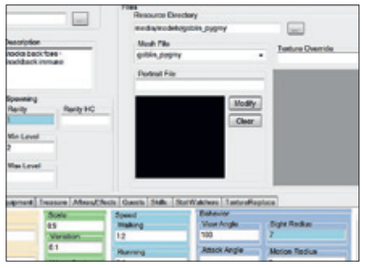
When the inevitable decay of your own soul takes the fun out of *Torchlight*, when you're seeing the same elements combined at random and your hand is twitching with frustrated boredom, TorchED is just what the doctor ordered. Need a new character class? Different enemies on different floors? Or just a giant, all-powerful starting sword? A few minutes of experimentation with TorchED (the tool used by Runic Games to develop content for the game) will let you reinvent the game entirely, if you know how to use it.

Of course, the randomized nature of *Torchlight* means that we'll be tweaking the rules that generate environments, weapons and enemies. This way, you can tailor a new item to your needs, and cause it to randomly appear in chests or drop from monsters. Our goal is a little more ambitious: We're going to walk you through the creation of a new pocket dungeon, a silly boss, and open a portal that will transport you into your new playground in the middle of the town. Download TorchED from snipurl.com/th2fz, run the installer, fire it up and wait. It needs a while; perhaps it's considering whether games are art? Get some coffee, maybe take a bath, and get ready for some modding.



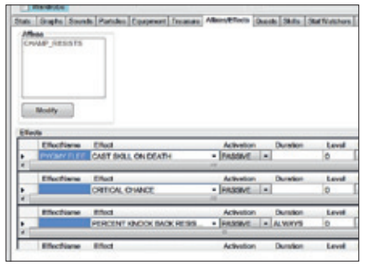
1 MISTER, I'LL...

When TorchED finally loads, look in the Data Editors menu to find links for all the tools you'll need to begin adding and tweaking random elements. Let's start small with Units. In the window that pops up, select Monsters as both the group and the filter, scroll down and find "rocktroll champion." Right click and select Clone this unit. Under File, enter the name as "pygmy_boss," and click OK. Cue a tiny man who thinks he's a giant troll.



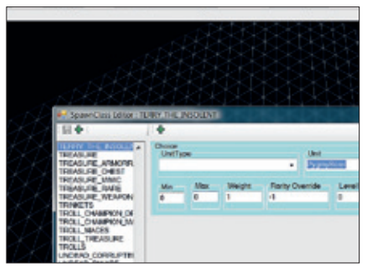
2 ...MAKE A MAN...

Change the name to "PygmyBoss", (no spaces) and enter "Terry the Insolent" as the display name. Under Resource Directory, navigate to media/models/goblin_pygmy, and select the mesh file as "goblin_pygmy". Check the Champion flag, and change the Minion SpawnClass to "PYGMYSTABBER_GROUP". On the Equipment tab, delete everything that's there, and under Unit, put a pygmy_polearm in his right hand.



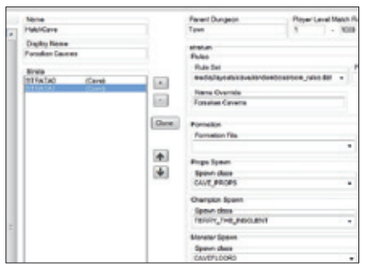
3 ...OUT OF YOU

On the Skills tab, click on each entry and press the delete key. Find the Affixes/Effects tab, right click below the list, and select New Effect. As the effect name, type in "PYGMY FLEE". The effect should be "Cast skill on death". Set activation to be Passive. Finally, click the small "x" beneath Texture Override. Close and save that editor, and open up the Spawn Classes window from the same menu.



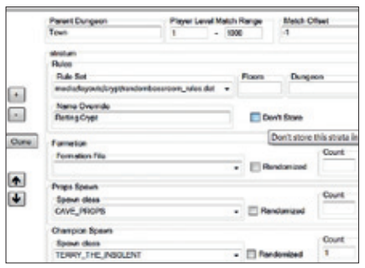
4 PURE CLASS

Click the green plus sign, enter "TERRY_THE_INSOLENT", and select PygmyBoss as the Unit. Enter the weight as 1. In this case, this means that the spawn class has a 100 percent chance of spawning Terry the Insolent; if we had something else there with the same weight, it'd be a 50/50 chance. Now go to Data Editors > Dungeons. We'll right-click > clone hatchcrypt.dat—it should be the second entry in the list.



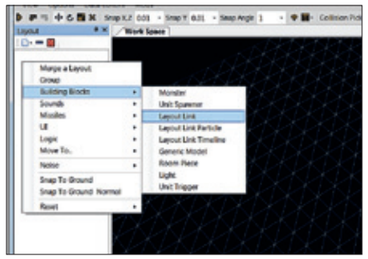
5 LEAGUE OF HIS OWN

The new File should be called Darkdeep. Select hatchcrypt.dat again from the list by the Clone check box. Change the name to Dark-deep and the display name to something impressive. For Strata0, change the rules to media/layouts/crypt/rules.dat (controls music and lighting). Select STRATA1 from the list and under Champion Spawn, change the Spawn Class to "TERRY_THE_INSOLENT". Tweak the Count of Terry the Insolent to just 1—1.



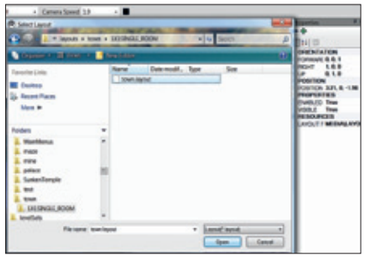
6 CHANGE OF SCENERY

Enter the rule set for Strata1 as media/layouts/crypt/randombossroom_rules.dat, and the Name Override should be something more sepulchral, like "Rotting Crypt". This special rule set includes a boss room in the random layout. Save and close that. We've made a dungeon and given it a boss; now, to link it up to the game. There are lots of ways to do this, but the easiest is to create a big portal in the town of Torchlight itself.



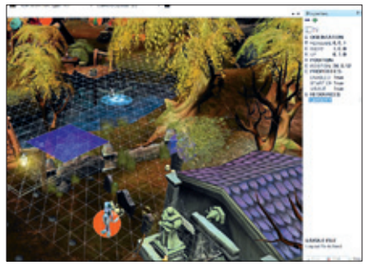
7 TO TORCHLIGHT

In TorchED proper, on the panel to the left, right click > Building Blocks > Layout Link. On the right-hand panel, under Resources, select Layout file and click the "..." button. Ahh! We're lost somewhere in AppData, a terrifying and strange region of your computer. Find your Program Files directory instead, and go to Runic Games > TorchEd > media > layouts > town > 1X1SINGLE_ROOM. Phew! Select town.layout, and click Open.



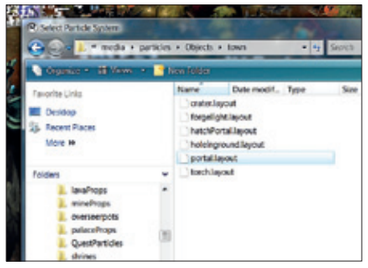
8 THINKING WITH PORTALS

Just like in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, what you're seeing here isn't really the actual town of Torchlight—this is just your Layout Link object, which we'll delete afterward. On the left panel, right click and select Group. Call it "Darkdeep Portal" (because that's what it is), and right click on that. We're going to make a Building Blocks > Unit Trigger, a Logic > Warper, and a Building Blocks > Layout Link Particle inside this folder.



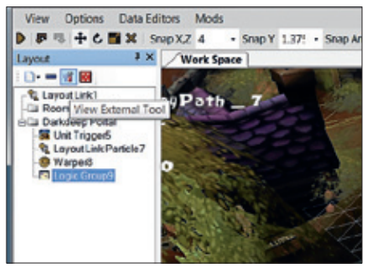
9 MORE DIRECTORIES

Select the Warper and, on the right panel under Properties, enter "Darkdeep" as the Dungeon name. For the Layout Link Particle, click on the "..." button next to Layout File. Find your TorchED directory again, and locate media > particles > objects > town > portal.layout. Click Open. Now, select your Unit Trigger and, on the right-hand panel, change the model to Portal and Loop Style to Cycle. Presto, you've got yourself a portal.



10 GET IT TOGETHER

Now, right-click on the Darkdeep Portal folder and create a Logic > Logic Group. Select it, and click the button with the tools icon called External Panel. Drag and drop your Unit Trigger and Warper onto this new window. Right click the Unit Trigger and select Output Trigger > Triggered. For the Warper, right click > Input Trigger > Activate Warper. Drag a line between the green and blue nodes to connect your portal to the destination.



11 CLEANING HOUSE

Delete the Layout Link now, and open the tiny menu at the top of the left panel. Click Save As to bring up another explorer window. Right-click the address bar, click Edit Address, and enter "%appdata%." From there, click Roaming > runic games > torchlight > mods > [your mod] > media > layouts > town > 1X1SINGLE_ROOM. Create a folder called "Merge", and save the file in there as darkdeep.layout. You're almost there!

12 INTO THE DARKDEEP

When you start up *Torchlight*, create a new character, and head up to the north-west part of town, you'll find a huge portal to a crypt filled with dinosaur-men and giant spiders. You're done! If you want to make something more advanced, check out the specialist tutorials under Vital Links. From importing your own models and sounds to altering enemy behavior, TorchED can handle it—you just have to be brave and delve deep enough into its depths.

MODS

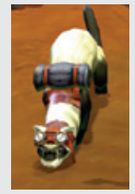
MORE FAST, CLICKY FUN

OUR FAVORITE TORCHLIGHT MODS

TORCHLEECH

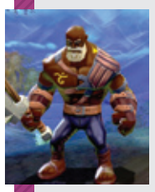
While not technically a mod itself, mod-manager TorchLeech is the first thing you want to install when you set out to enhance your game. This will allow you to install, update and keep all your mods running together in harmony. *tinyurl.com/ybq5btn*

FERRET PET



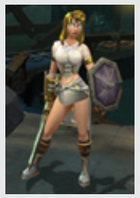
Craving something more unique than a dog or cat? The Ferret Pet (made by Runic) allows you to adventure with a giant weasel by your side, or even turn your current pet into one using a permanent transformation fish. *tinyurl.com/yea2z8h*

WOW SHAMAN



Hey! You got *WoW* in my *Torchlight*! The *WoW* Shaman mod adds a new, fully playable Shaman class to *Torchlight*, complete with skills ~~ripped off from~~ inspired by *World of Warcraft*. The first time you knock back 100 enemies using Thunderstorm, you'll be hooked. *tinyurl.com/y9gfnnf*

VALKYRIE



This new player class may remind you of a certain Amazon from *Torchlight*'s spiritual predecessor, *Diablo*. With new voiceovers, art, and skills, the Valkyrie is another lass with sass ready to kick some... monsters. *tinyurl.com/yb2qn52*

ITEMS ALWAYS IDENTIFIED

We both know you're smart, so why does *Torchlight* assume you don't know what items do without using scrolls and magic? Show the game who's boss with Items Always Identified, a mod that does just what it says: identifies items immediately when you pick them up, and lets you say goodbye to those pesky Identify scrolls. *tinyurl.com/yafonr2*

with Logan Decker

THE HIGH AND LOWS OF ATI

Monster new Radeons leave only crumbs for Nvidia

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE ★★★★★

Radeon HD 5970

Only a year ago, ATI was sitting around glumly drinking a six-pack of blow me while Nvidia's GeForce family of videocards ruled the rigs and fantasies of gamers across the country. But since then, ATI has been on a roll with its reasonably priced and awesomely powerful HD 5000 series, now cherry-topped with the HD 5970—currently the fastest videocard in the world, for just slightly less than all the money in the world.

OK, that was a little harsh. $600 is an awful lot of money, but not outrageous for a card that's essentially two HD 5870's (note that ATI has apparently dropped the "X2" suffix) with 2GB of GDDR5 memory between them, and one that—surprisingly—is actually faster in most benchmarks than two HD 5870's in CrossFire config (which still go for $400 apiece). Reassuringly, the HD 5870 isn't just a Frankencard soldered together—it's well-designed, with a reasonable 300W power draw and nearly silent operation, operating quietly even at full bore without any wheezing or spin-ups. However, it's *huge*—at 12.3 inches long, you could actually see this card from Google Earth. Don't assume that it'll fit inside your case—stick a ruler in there and see if the card won't crash into your RAM, or if there's room left over for the plugs and cables. Plus, it weighs over 2.5 pounds, and I do have to wonder if PCI-e slots were designed to secure that much weight; I certainly wouldn't take a rig with the HD 5970 in it to a LAN party without removing the videocard first.

But I *would* take it to a LAN party, because this card stomps all over the benchmarks. It's ideal if you've got the space, run 2560x1600 on a 30-inch display or use multiple displays (the card supports ATI's Eyefinity technology, which allows you to use *up to six monitors at once*, just like they do in the movies), or if you're the type wants to future-proof your videocard for a year or longer. Otherwise, the Radeon HD 5970 may actually be *too* much power—you'll spend premium dollars for graphical power you may not need, considering that the HD 5870 is almost as fast for far less cash.

PC GAMER 90

VITALS **MSRP** $599 **URL** ati.amd.com **CATEGORY** Dream(y)

Radeon HD 5670

The buzz on the Radeon HD 5670 is that it's the first sub-$100 videocard that's compatible with DirectX 11. Zzzz. It *is* a sub-$100 videocard and it *is* a reasonably capable videocard with a five-figure 3DMark06 score and plenty of juice for modest resolutions. But why bother? The card poops out long before you've ratcheted up to a resolution where you'll benefit from any DX11 effects—such as they are. It's relatively inexpensive, but you'll pay heavily in framerates and reduced longevity.

Instead, you'd be better off with a GeForce GTX 250, or, better yet, the best entrée ATI's served in years—the Radeon HD 5770, which will bag you nearly 50 percent better performance if you can swing an extra $60. Remember: It's all well and good to save money, but not if you end up cheating yourself.

PC GAMER 72

VITALS **MSRP** $99 **URL** ati.amd.com **CATEGORY** Mid

Benchmarks

	3DMark06	Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode 1	World in Conflict: Soviet Assault	Supreme Commander
ATI Radeon 5670 HD 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	11639	P6247	21fps/16/4	146fps/107/64	22/17/10	39fps/33/22
ATI Radeon 5770 HD 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	16570	P10027	34fps/27/18	189fps/162/114	35fps/31/21	53fps/50/35
ATI Radeon 5970 HD 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	20129	P20053	68fps/65/42	285fps/284/280	79/75/58	54fps/52/54

FOUR EARS, TWO HEADSETS

Logan Decker and Erik Belsaas—also known as the Hard Stuff Audiophile Concern—pool their ear-sources together to evaluate two new headsets

Saitek Cyborg 5.1

What's this set got against heads?

LOGAN: I guess this headset is OK if you're not concerned about sound or comfort. The bass is grossly exaggerated to the point where I thought I was hearing tubas instead of weapon fire, and the highs are the audio equivalent of tarnished silver.
ERIK: I knew something was wrong once I put them on. I adjusted the 'set again and again, but there was just no coaxing any relief from the evil acupressure that was being applied to my head. After a half-hour, the strange pressure was nearly unbearable.
LOGAN: Agreed. It's not quite as bad as a bear trap, but the pressure above and behind the ears is awful, perhaps to take your mind off the sound. They did, however, cover my ears and kept them warm, so there's that.
ERIK: A removable microphone and in-line volume control are nice additions, but they aren't enough to save the Cyborg 5.1—it's a headset I simply can't bear to wear.
LOGAN: The microphone sucked, though. And it kept falling out. Enough's enough.

PC GAMER 28

VITALS **MSRP** $180 **URL** saitekusa.com **CATEGORY** Dream (Nightmare)

Steelseries Siberia v2

Military-grade gaming audio

LOGAN: I don't know if it's because I was relieved to take the Saitek 'phones off, or because two out of three of my favorite headsets have come from SteelSeries, but I couldn't wait to try these out. They did not disappoint. The same lovely, luminous sound in games *and* music, which no longer bleeds out of the earcups as in the previous Siberia model.
ERIK: I've been conditioned over the years to believe that you need 5.1 surround sound—as in six physical drivers—to play games well. So I was skeptical approaching the Siberia v2. I now understand that I was misled; *Modern Warfare 2* multiplayer provided my main test bed for audio accuracy, and I was surprised at how *efficiently* stereo sound works in the game. I was able to determine the direction of enemy fire and distant explosions as well as I can while using my 5.1 headphones.
LOGAN: The retractable mic quality is excellent, but it can be stubborn to extract, like a tick. The new piano black earcups are awesome, though. And like the last model in the Siberia line, they're as comfy as a Snuggie.

PC GAMER 93

VITALS **MSRP** $110 **URL** steelseries.com/us **CATEGORY** Dream

Razer Imperator

Thumbs up!

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE ★★★★★

I can barely keep up—at this point, Razer's got more mice than Disneyland. The newest addition to its arsenal of desktop weapons is the Imperator, which pretty much maxes out the specs—laser sensor with 5,600 dpi sensitivity and a 1000Hz polling speed—and packs them into a perfectly contoured and lightweight chassis that's an improvement even over the fine forms that have been typical on Razer mice for years. There are dual buttons beneath the scroll wheel that let you change dpi on the fly, and everything's tethered to a braided fiber cable. And just as you're about to enjoy the cake, this sexy lady jumps out: The position of the thumb buttons can be adjusted by about a half-inch along a groove in the side of the mouse. This is awesome—I only wish Razer had pulled the same trick with the dpi buttons as well.

It's also nice to see a high-end mouse buck the trend of the triple-digit price; $80 is a lot, but not unreasonable for a mouse of this quality. And moveable thumb buttons can mean the difference between thumb buttons you use and thumb buttons that you mean to use, but don't. Another winner from Razer.

PC GAMER **90**

VITALS **MSRP** $80 **URL** razerzone.com **CATEGORY** Dream

Q&A: Now, *I'm* asking the questions

Did you...

WEEKLY

- ☐ ...defrag your hard drive? (Note: Do not defragment solid state drives!)
- ☐ ...look for patches for your current games?

MONTHLY

- ☐ ...check for new videocard drivers?
- ☐ ...flush out temp files with CCleaner? (Free, via ccleaner.com)
- ☐ ...run a deep antivirus/spyware check? (Free, via AVG.com or Microsoft.com/Security_Essentials)

EVERY SIX MONTHS

- ☐ ...check your hard drive for errors (using ScanDisk or Chkdsk)?
- ☐ ...check for new motherboard chipset drivers on the manufacturer's website?
- ☐ ...clean your case's dust filters?
- ☐ ...blow out the dust from your case with compressed air? (Remember the *Aliens* rule: short, controlled bursts.)

Hard Stuff Trinity

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU	
COOLER MASTER COSMOS; 850W PSU	$423	NZXT ALPHA; OCZ GAMEXSTREAM 700W PSU	$175	GENERIC CASE; CORSAIR 450W PSU	$161
PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR	
INTEL CORE i7-950 3.06GHZ	$555	INTEL CORE I7-920 2.66GHZ	$270	AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.0GHZ	$59
MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD	
ASUS P6T DELUXE V2	$270	ASUS P6T	$234	ASUS M3A76-CM	$68
MEMORY		MEMORY		MEMORY	
CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1600	$155	CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1333	$165	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	$69
OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE	
LG WH08LS20 BLU-RAY	$179	LG GH22NP20	$31	SONY DDU1681S	$26
HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE	
INTEL X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	$311	WD 500GB 7200RPM	$50	WD 250GB 7200RPM	$38
SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD	
CREATIVE LABS X-FI TITANIUM	$96	ONBOARD	$0	ONBOARD	$0
VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD	
RADEON HD 5970	$599	RADEON HD 5870	$407	GEFORCE GT 220	$70
	$2,588		$1,332		$491

New Life, "Eww" Civilizations

Our first instinct when getting our hands on a new set of character-creation tools is to sculpt the foxiest, most true-to-life version of Tina Fey that the sliders, color palettes and tools can muster. Shortly thereafter, we assemble the strangest, most disfigured, disturbing creature possible. We put *Star Trek Online*'s race-creator through the ugly test, because hey, they can't *all* be busty Vulcans.

PC GAMER

EDITORIAL
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF **Logan Decker**
SENIOR EDITOR **Evan Lahti**
REVIEWS EDITOR **Dan Stapleton**
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR **Josh Augustine**
INTERNS **Erik Belsaas, Prentice Gede**
CONTRIBUTORS **Richard Cobbett, Richard McCormick, Alec Meer, Craig Pearson, Rachel Penny, Quintin Smith, Tim Stone**
PRODUCER **Debra Guilfoyle**
PURPLE AND RULED THE WORLD **Alexander the Grape**

ART
LEAD DESIGNER **Dan Fitzpatrick**
CONTRIBUTING DESIGNER **Shelley Szudera**
PHOTOGRAPHERS **Mark Madeo, Samantha Berg**

BUSINESS
GROUP PUBLISHER **Kelley Corten** **kcorten@futureus.com**
PUBLISHER **Kristen Salvatore** **ksalvatore@futureus.com**
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR INTEGRATED SALES **Nathan Hunt** **415-269-5408, nhunt@futureus.com**
REGIONAL SALES DIRECTOR **Isaac Ugay** **949-305-0767, iugay@futureus.com**
REGIONAL SALES DIRECTOR **Carol Gillard** **949-305-0767, iugay@futureus.com**
REGIONAL SALES MANAGER **Rachel Campos** **650-745-9207, rcampos@futureus.com**
ACCOUNT MANAGER **Arthur St. Germain** **650-238-2571, astgermain@futureus.com**
DETROIT CONSUMER MANAGER **Alan Dickinson** **248-792-2408, alandmedia@comcast.net**
SENIOR MARKETING MANAGER **Andrea Recio-Ang** **650-238-2548, arecio-ang@futureus.com**
MARKETING COORDINATOR **Allyson Kardel** **akardel@futureus.com**
ADVERTISING COORDINATOR **Jose Urrutia** **jurrutia@futureus.com**

PRODUCTION
PRODUCTION DIRECTOR **Michael Hollister**
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR **Dan Mallory**
PRINT ORDER COORDINATOR **Linh Chau-Ward**

CONSUMER MARKETING
DIRECTOR CONSUMER MARKETING **Rich McCarthy**
CIRCULATION MANAGER **Stephanie Blake**
NEWSSTAND DIRECTOR **Bill Shewey**
CONSUMER MARKETING OPERATIONS DIRECTOR **Lisa Radler**
RENEWAL AND BILLING MANAGER **Mike Hill**
BUSINESS MANAGER **Elliot Kiger**
SR. ONLINE CONSUMER MARKETING MANAGER **Jennifer Trinkner**
CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGER **Mike Frassica**

FUTURE US, INC.
4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080
www.futureus.com
PRESIDENT **John Marcom**
VICE PRESIDENT/CFO **John Sutton**
VICE PRESIDENT INTERNET DEVELOPMENT **Tyson Daugherty**
VICE PRESIDENT SALES AND ADVERTISING **Rachelle Considine**
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR GAMES GROUP **Stephen Pierce**
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR MUSIC **Brad Tolinski**
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR TECH **Jon Phillips**
GENERAL COUNSEL **Charlotte Falla**
HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR **Nancy Durlester DuBois**

Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

Future US, Inc. is part of Future plc. Future plc produces carefully targeted special-interest magazines for people who share a passion. We aim to satisfy that passion by creating titles offering value for money, reliable information, and smart buying advice, and which are a pleasure to read. Today we publish more than 100 magazines in the United States, UK, France, and Italy. Over 100 international editions of our magazines are also published in 31 other countries across the world. The Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR). Jason Mitchell was just the coconut next door. Until one day, his entire life was turned upside down. Due to recent incursions by gravy poachers in the area, Jason and his mom were forced to move to the small lake town of Bellshire. Now, he's starting at a new school and is forced to make new friends. Jason would remain quiet and elusive, until one day he was befriended by his science class partner, Alvin, the coolest coconut on campus. Now, they're teaming up to take on Mr. Macdonald, the mean vice-principal with a knack for the classics and a soft spot for giving out detention, in the school's talent show. They'll need all the help they can get, as pals Simon and Theodore join the team, if they want to defeat Macdonald's undefeated rendition of "Blue Suede Shoes." This Spring, Jason, Alvin, Simon and Theodore are... Alvin and the Coconuts.

FUTURE plc
30 Monmouth St., Bath, Avon, BA1 2BW, England
www.thefuturenetwork.plc.uk / Tel +44 1225 442244
CHIEF EXECUTIVE: **Stevie Spring**
GROUP FINANCE DIRECTOR: **John Bowman**

REPRINTS: Contact Reprint Management Services, 717-399-1900, ext. 100.
SUBSCRIPTION QUERIES: Please visit www.pcgamer.com, email PCGcustserv@cdsfulfillment.com, call 800-898-7159, or write to PC Gamer Customer Care, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658.
ISSN-1080-4471